

AN ELEMENT OF UNREASON

IRWIN SHAW : *Tip on a Dead Jockey*. Cape. 15s.

WILLIAM SANSOM : *Among the Dahlias*. Hogarth Press. 15s.

H. E. BATES : *Sugar for the Horse*. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

Most of Mr. Shaw's stories end on a note of regret, sometimes for a missed opportunity, sometimes for the sad nature of the world, sometimes for the sad nature of man, but this does not prevent them being thoroughly excellent and entertaining stories, carrying the reflection of a humane and often humorous attitude to life. As many are set in Europe as not, but even so the viewpoint remains always American, and part at least of the integrity that marks Mr. Shaw's writing seems to come from this refusal to shed his own skin, or rather that of his countrymen.

In this way one gets a realistic and yet recognizable impression of what Europe can mean in the way of experience, excitement, disillusion, delight, or discouragement to a variety of Americans, ranging from the old campaigners such as Barber in the story that gives its title to the collection, to young Americans such as Munnie and Bert of "Then there were three" doing their grand, or not so grand, tour of Europe. A point which Mr. Shaw stresses in several of his stories is how large an element of the irrational remains in modern man even in an age supposedly of reason; in "Tip on a Dead Jockey" he works this most effectively into his picture of Barber's boredom and general disillusionment in the appropriate setting of a small and seedy third-rate Parisian hotel. When at the end Barber decides "I'd better get out of here. . . . This continent is not for me," one feels that for once this is not the cry of the adolescent bruising his toe on life but a realistic decision all too well justified by the run of events. Mr. Shaw's stories are well rounded and well written and all that one can hold against them is that taken

in conjunction they emphasize perhaps excessively the nostalgic and regretful element in life.

Mr. Sansom's stories are written with his customary skill and are marked as a collection by his customary mixture of sensitivity and brutality. If, as before, one is often struck by the careful originality of his prose and by his brilliant characterization, yet there is no denying also the delight with which he reveals the terror latent in everyday life -- to be found, for example, "Among the Dahlias" at the Zoo, or in "A Visit to the Dentist." Some of Mr. Sansom's stories are concentrated to the point when he seems primarily concerned to express the essence of a particular mood or moment or a short everyday occurrence; in these, such as "Evenide" or "Cat up a Tree," he shows himself at his best, blending characters and situation into a single satisfying image that is both impressionistic and explanatory at the same time. In some of his longer pieces, however, notably the ambitious "The Equilibriad" with which he closes his collection, his psychological curiosity seems to run away with him, and the outline in consequence is much less sharp, the impact less direct.

Admirers of Mr. Bates's writing will already be familiar with Uncle Silas.

In this volume of short stories Mr. Bates recounts a further dozen escapades in which the rascally and refreshingly unrepentant old countryman is not only the central character but almost invariably the cause of the mischief. Uncle Silas comes out of them all unscathed and with his villainy untarnished, but his adventures do not often come up to the level of entertainment to be expected of so expert a storyteller as Mr. Bates.