

A SATIRE AND SOME STORIES

- Public Faces.** By HAROLD NICOLSON. Constable. 7s. 6d.
The Burning Bush. By SIGRID UNDSET. Cassell. 8s. 6d.
Invitation to the Waltz. By ROSAMOND LEHMANN. Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.
The Fallow Land. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 7s. 6d.
Little Comfort. By GEORGE MANNING-SANDERS. Grayson and Grayson. 7s. 6d.
Anna Priestly. By EVELYN HERBERT. Cape. 7s. 6d.
Marriage of Hermione. By RICHMAL CROMPTON. Macmillan. 7s. 6d.
Moon in Scorpio. By HELEN GRANVILLE-BARKER. Sidgwick and Jackson. 7s. 6d.

Mr. Nicolson's novel is in a different category from the others on the list, and must be judged apart. In 1939 an awkward international situation arises. Britain finds herself able to make atomic bombs from a mineral deposit on an island held by her from Persia; the other Powers, after the deposit though as yet only partially aware of its value, persuade Persia to cancel the concession. What is to be done? During four days of acute suspense war of the most horrid kind is imminent; in a series of brisk scenes in Downing Street, Teheran, Washington and Paris Mr. Nicolson shows it coming nearer and nearer, driven on by the small ineptitudes and vanities of diplomats and politicians. The introduction of real people—Mr. Garvin, Miss Eleanor Rathbone, Sir John Reith and Oliver Baldwin are mentioned among others—titillates the curiosity agreeably as to the identity of the fictitious characters; while Mr. Nicolson's diplomatic experience lends a fearful point to his wit. For a lively, pertinent, exciting and immensely knowledgeable satire on the ways of diplomacy, *Public Faces* takes some beating.

The remaining novels deal with life as it is seen by the naked eye, not through the magnifying glass of satire. *The Burning*

Bush is the second volume of Sigrid Undset's latest trilogy. Its theme is that of *The Hound of Heaven*; Paul Selmer, the willful worldling, driven ever towards the Will which closes round his own, is at length received into the Catholic Church. The reader who shares Paul's faith will no doubt experience a deep pleasure in the glowing descriptions of the metaphysical phenomena of conversion; while the agnostic will deplore with equal conviction the cramping and hooding of a free mind. The critic who approaches the book from the purely literary point of view must, I think, observe that the unfortunate tendency of the religious novel to make its hero into a prig has here surmounted even Sigrid Undset's genius. It is surely a wise instinct on the part of the ordinary person to regard with suspicion the man who is always in the position of *forgiving*, for forgiveness implies a conviction of moral superiority, very distasteful to the scientific mind. Accordingly Paul, who is busy forgiving his vulgar little wife and austere mother all through the volume, is not an attractive character, and his two pious children are quite insufferable. In spite of this the book, like all this writer's work, throbs with life; one feels its pulsating warmth on every page. The landscapes, too, are magnificent; the early scenes with little Sunnie, before she becomes converted, piercingly, radiantly true; the analysis of the defects of modern civilisation, profound. It is notoriously unfair to judge an incomplete work; we must wait for the third volume before coming to a final decision on the value of Paul's experiences.

It is this same quality of warm throbbing life which makes *Imitation to the Waltz*—in outline a mere trifle—so pleasing. It reminds me of nothing so much as a beautiful red plum: coloured, smooth, rounded, glowing, small enough to nestle comfortably in the curve of the hand. Kate and Olivia, the daughters of country gentlefolk, are invited to a dance. They make their preparations, live through the weeks which intervene, and at last attend the dance. That is all. But what an air of youth and love we move in! The joys, the heartaches, the hopes, the disappointments, we are made to feel! Kate has beauty, and a sureness of touch which is the admiration and despair of her immature sister; Olivia hasn't yet found herself, she can't put herself together, doesn't feel all of a piece. Kate finds love at the dance; but Olivia has a wider range of experience with her partners: a poet, an old lecher, a blind man, a fiery sailor, call in turn upon her joy and her compassion. Life is about to begin for her, thinks Olivia, and runs joyously to meet it. As for the grace and wit of Miss Lehmann's writing, I am going to illustrate it by quoting her description of a cabbage bed. For roses lend themselves easily to raptures, but fine writing about cabbages is the real thing.

She admired the cabbage bed—its frosty sea-blues and greens, the modelling of the huge compact rosettes with their strong swelling curves and crisp-cut edges. The looser outer leaves held sparkling drops and violet shadows. She shook one, listening to its silky creak, watching the transparent water beads slip and race like quicksilver. And these proud vital shapes were doomed to be chopped up, boiled, swallowed by humans with the utmost boredom and contempt. The very word cabbage was a joke, a term of ridicule . . . But it was no good brooding over the sufferings, the unjust fate of vegetables . . .

The Fallow Land and *Little Comfort* are both novels of farm life, but they are as different as cheese and chalk. I put the familiar comparison that way round, because Mr. Bates's novel is made (like cheese) from living material, and Mr. George Manning-Sanders' from a convention which ought to be as dead as chalk if it unfortunately isn't. The people of *Little Comfort* are all "rustics," seen from the outside by an urban Powystical eye; they go in for dark lust and talk abominable literary dialect. "Did widow say off the name all pat, or did she stutter and crimp as if it ran through her blood and brain, like so much naughty magic?" demands the midwife archly. For, of course, there is a Midwife, just as there is a Loose Beauty, a Sensitive and Debauched Young Man, a Horsewhipping Father, a Marvellous Mother, and a Stranger with a Hump. Mr. Manning-Sanders means well and writes well, but has as yet nothing to say.

The Fallow Land, on the other hand, is a grave, true piece of work, marred by some irrelevances, but rising at times to living beauty. It is the tale of fifty years of a woman's life. Deborah, maid to a bedridden old woman, meets Jess Mortimer, the farmer's son, at a country fair, marries him, and spends the rest of her life in an ardent struggle to nourish his land. She bears sons to him, is deserted by him, loses her sons to war and then to post-war degeneration, but throughout never ceases to love the

land which to her, as to Mr. Bates, stands for life itself. Last this should sound too romantic, I hasten to say that Mr. Bates is a realist as well. His dialect is not literary; Deborah says "I'm fair whacked" when she is tired, and means it. This plainness makes for authenticity of emotion; the return of Jess, for example, old and worn and deaf, is extraordinarily moving.

The stream of life does not flow so rich and warm through Evelyn Herbert's Breconshire mining town, yet it does flow; there are moments when Anna is passionately alive. But these moments are muffled in a superfluity of incidents; the book lacks shape, probably because it has no unifying theme. In revolt against the sombre meanness of her life, Anna gives herself to the more worthless of two brothers who love her; she pays for it all her days, but there seems no special significance either in her endurance or her revolt.

The last two novels on the list present the extremes of naïveté and sophistication. Miss Riechmal Crompton, like Mr. Bates and Miss Herbert, has given us the chronicle of fifty years of a woman's life. But though the theme is the same, the handling is not, and oh, the difference to me! *Marriage of Hermione* is like a perpetual diet of milk pudding; wholesome perhaps, but savourless, monotonous, of the nursery. *Moon in Scorpio*, on the other hand, is so highly civilised that there is no life left in it—a great disappointment after the slight but charming *Come, Julia*. The scene is Rome, the characters Anglo-American, the atmosphere pseudo-Henry-James, the incomes large. Olivia has beauty but no youth, Frances youth but no beauty. In the intervals of inspecting objects of art they fall in love with the same man, with disastrous results. In this novel it is accepted as axiomatic that no man ever loved a woman who lacked facial beauty—a proposition so false that one has hardly patience to read the narrative based on it. "Olivia and her friends," observes one of the characters, "didn't belong to the present; or—more exactly—they were cut off from the future." A good thing too!

PHYLLIS BENTLEY.

VIRGINIA WOOLF, CRITIC

The Common Reader: Second Series. By VIRGINIA WOOLF. Hogarth Press, 10s. 6d.

Virginia Woolf. By WINIFRED HOLTYBY. Wishart, 6s.

In most literary criticism, it is the subject that is important, not the writer nor even what is written; just as, when something is lost in a dark room, it may be necessary to hold up a light to find it, but neither the light nor the hand that holds it up is the important thing. But when Mrs. Woolf writes, as she does most often in this latest volume of essays, about secondary writers, almost forgotten, or remembered for some strong idiosyncrasy rather than for their genius or the value of their work, the illumination she gives is more important to her readers than what it illuminates; or if they look away from the light itself, it is to see how it falls on her own creative work, elucidating that, not on the work of the people she is criticising. But most readers will be contented to look at the thing itself, at her essays simply for their own sake: they will be enchanted by them, whether or not they have read what she is writing about. For her criticism has something of that quality, characteristic of poetry, which Miss Holtyby has observed in her fiction, a kind of self-substance: what she writes is itself its own end and meaning; it does not say "there," pointing, but "here." This is most true of her later novels, of which every phrase is valuable of itself and self-sufficient; it is this that makes the words of *The Waves* not only as delightful as poetry but as easily memorable.

Criticism, of course, cannot reach this self-sufficiency, because it has a purpose outside itself; it refers to something else. But between completely utilitarian, robot criticism, which exists only in its function, and the free existence of Keats' sonnet on Chapman's Homer, where the criticism, if it can be called that, has completely broken away from and outshines its theme, there are infinite gradations; and Mrs. Woolf is towards the extreme of Keats. Her words are more important, when we read them, than what she is writing about. It is not because she herself thinks her subject unimportant; she is deeply interested in it and never lets it out of her sight. But her approach to it is never a prose approach. She does not dissect and analyse, or collect facts, compare them, and pass judgment. Sometimes, indeed, she does collect facts, for which she has a great liking, and facts about her author's surroundings or the clothes he wore, but it is not to make deductions from them, but to breathe the