

## NEW NOVELS

- Nothing Like Leather.** By V. S. PRITCHETT. *Chatto and Windus*. 7s. 6d.
- The Poacher.** By H. E. BATES. *Cape*. 7s. 6d.
- The Epic-Makers.** By PAUL MORAND. Transl. by STUART GILBERT. *Loval Dickinson*. 7s. 6d.
- A House Divided.** By PEARL S. BUCK. *Methuen*. 7s. 6d.
- The White Peony.** By EVELYN HERBERT. *Cape*. 7s. 6d.
- Nets to Catch the Wind.** By BARBARA WORSLEY-GOUGH. *Cassell*. 7s. 6d.

Modern novelists may be divided into two classes, one large and one exceedingly small. There are the opportunists and there are the zealots—writers who take up the novel because it offers them an almost unexampled scope for doing just what they please, hitting off their friends, criticising contemporary society or indulging in autobiographical digression; and the “born” novelists, a select few, who have adopted the medium because it satisfies their sense of continuity and dramatic development as nothing else could. True novelists, alas, are very rare. Of every dozen chroniclers who set out, usually at enormous length, to describe the evolution of a character, the rise and decadence of a family, the disappearance of one generation and the emergence of the next, how many succeed in convincing us that time has really passed, life has been lived—so forcibly that our own experience is modified? Novelists who belong to the larger category may leave us with a series of isolated impressions, disconnected pictures; but we are reminded of the primitive cinematograph once very popular among English children—scenes that moved when flipped over by the thumb. For a second the little drawings had an air of movement; it ceased abruptly if we ceased to turn the pages.

Thus, the movement of many novels is completely factitious. Of the books under review, only Mr. V. S. Pritchett's *Nothing Like Leather*, appears to grow in obedience to some principle of inner development, implied by the theme. Not content with describing a series of episodes, Mr. Pritchett introduces us to a character who lives, grows and moves, whose personality dominates the narrative and whose progress is inseparable from the effect produced. Mathew Burkle would have delighted Arnold Bennett; but whereas Arnold Bennett would have endowed this small business man and war-time profiteer with the robust and sanguine vulgarity of the Five Towns, Mr. Pritchett refuses to allow him to become a type. Burkle is invariably odd and unexpected. Here is the story of a schemer, frustrated at the last because he fails to recognise that what he desires is not the object of his ambition so much as its emotional and romantic periphery. Again and again, he confuses the shadow and the substance. . . . Mathew is one of those deeply romantic personages whose romanticism must always be harnessed to some purely utilitarian end. He achieves it, or it is within his grasp; and, lo and behold, it does not satisfy. Though not a long book, *Nothing Like Leather* is so closely and cleverly condensed that it is difficult to do the narrative justice in the compass of a single short paragraph. Both Mathew himself and Henrietta Petworth, his employer's daughter, the woman whom he loves and who has the special fascination of symbolising the wealth and freedom towards which he climbs, are characters drawn with sympathy and uncommon skill; while Mathew's commercial background is extraordinarily vivid. Mr. Pritchett knows a great deal about tanneries; but, thank heaven, his knowledge of the *milieu* is never obtrusive.

The style of the book is supple and intelligent. Mr. Pritchett, I feel sure, is a novelist who had chosen the novel for the simple and sufficient reason that prose narrative and the detailed analysis of character are the forms that suit him best. Mr. Bates, on the other hand, though he writes more exquisitely than Mr. Pritchett, tends to build up his novel from a series of pictures, each delightful in its way, but each complete and finished in itself. His book does not develop with the same gusto. . . . A poaching expedition; a snow-scene; a lonely man at work in a large field on the outskirts of a big, ugly town. Nothing that he writes is undistinguished, and there are many passages in *The Poacher* that must be numbered among the most beautiful he has produced; yet the impression they make is strangely static. The book is a stringing-together of brilliant episodes, connected by a slight and arbitrary tale.

Mr. Bates is a story-teller first and foremost. His short stories are economically constructed, smoothly written and, at their finest, full of the subdued autumnal poetry that we appreciate in

the verses of George Crabbe. In *The Poacher*, a succession of stories coalesce; the story of a poacher in his old age, at variance with his superior shrewish middle-class wife; stories of his youth, of how he assaulted a policeman and was lost in the snow, of how he and his father raided new territory:

Out in the park, in the unbroken space of grassland between the thick belt of trees and the mansion itself the night was utterly silent. The feet of the men were soundless. They were walking now, due northwards, the stars by the Plough very brilliant to the right of the great house, the Plough half-inverted. Before them, high above its stone terraces, beyond the cedar trees, the house had a look of strange remoteness. In the clear starlight the many white closed shutters of the windows were just visible, the pale stone face of the house broken up horizontally here and there by the blackness of the slender cedar branches. There were no lights and no sound except as they drew nearer to the place the quiet sound of running water—the sound of a waterfall flowing invisibly down somewhere beyond the cedars and the terraces. The water itself flowed away into a thin stream across the park and as they crossed the stream in a single leap Luke caught the smell of the water, half-sweet, half-rotten with the odour of fallen leaves.

That waterfall (which also sounds through a short story) seems curiously characteristic of the writer's method, as does the glimpse of deserted park and darkened trees. So melancholy its cadence, so hushed and evocative, it is ill-suited to turn the mill-wheels of modern fiction.

M. Paul Morand is less a novelist than a commentator; and, though *The Epic-Makers* is not quite up to the standard of *Ouvert la Nuit*, it is a remarkably amusing book, a high-spirited satire on the modern film industry, with particular reference to the production of films in France. Films, as we know, are sponsored all over the world by gentlemen with odd names, of undefined and often somewhat dubious nationality. Sacha Sacher, Kalitrich, Jacobi and Pericles Hermeticos were primarily responsible for *Fayre France*, a film version of the *Chanson de Roland*, subsidised by the Comte de Kergael with the proceeds of his last two farms; and, while Kergael put up the money, Sacher, Jacobi and the others, each backed by his financial group—“not men they seemed, so much as nebulae in movement”—set to work the machinery of credit, piling up discounted, rediscounted and re-rediscounted bills to the tune of several times more than the



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original sum. Kergael is killed; *Fayre France*, with a producer who has been engaged in mistake for an entirely different German-Jewish producer of the same name, develops into a white elephant of monstrous proportions; and M. Tardif, attorney to the deceased Kergael, appears on the scene as chief creditor. Never had the little Breton lawyer imagined such an existence as he discovers when he travels down to the Basque country to watch the shooting of the film. Confusion, waste, hopeless insolvency, mutinous actors, recalcitrant camera-men and Russian extras with a periodical tendency to run amok. . . . There seems no hope of recovering his million; yet, thanks in part to his own shrewdness, to the twistings and turning of the Levantine "group" and to the successful villainy of Kron, the bogus producer, the film achieves a triumph of the first magnitude; and the last episode is laid in a picture-palace on the Champs Elysées, where it receives the blessing of the President of the French Republic.

No one who has been allowed even the briefest glimpse behind the Corinthian facade of an international film company will consider that M. Morand has given an exaggerated or unduly satirical account of the lines on which one of the greatest modern industries is apt to do business. Besides its diverting sketch of a film in the making, the novel contains a lively exploration of the arcana of High Finance and some unforgettable portraits of those who engage in it. Take, for instance, Sacher's linguistic abilities. Tardif and his client's mother, the Comtesse de Kergael, are in consultation, when Sacher and his friends, who have flown from Paris, invade the old lady's drawing-room:

They held a hurried colloquy in the ancient tongue of Southern Brittany. Suddenly, to the general amazement, Sacher burst into the conversation.

"*Konz e hran brehoneg!*" he proudly perorated.

"What? You talk Breton?" the Countess exclaimed.

"Matame, I ton't know how it is, but as soon as I am in a country I can always speak de language."

*Nothing Like Leather*, *The Poacher* and *The Epic-Makers* are three books of uncommon and refreshing quality. Turning to *A House Divided*, Mrs. Pearl Buck's latest novel, one can only say that this is a romance that will not add to her admirers—indeed, it may disappoint some who admired that comparatively humdrum chronicle, *The Good Earth*—but will delight faithful members of the Buck faction. Both *The White Peony*, an interesting but, on the whole, not very convincing story about domestic life in a Welsh mining town, and *Nets to Catch the Wind*, are second novels. Since she produced *Public Affairs*, a social comedy which owed a great deal to the authoress's acquaintanceship with the work of Mr. Evelyn Waugh, Miss Barbara Worsley-Gough has made great strides, both in originality and in the knowledge of her art; and *Nets to Catch the Wind* is a serious effort. Incidentally, her description of the priggish orphans is much funnier than anything in her earlier book.

PETER QUENNELL