

NEW NOVELS

- Cut and Come Again.** By H. E. BATES. *Cape.* 7s. 6d.
Fierce and Gentle. By H. A. MANHOOD. *Cape.* 7s. 6d.
The Basement Room. By GRAHAM GREENE. *Cresset Press.* 3s. 6d.
The Laburnum Tree. By JAMES LAVER. *Cresset Press.* 3s. 6d.
More Joy in Heaven. By SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER. *Cresset Press.* 3s. 6d.
To Blush Unseen. By VALENTINE DOBRÉE. *Cresset Press.* 3s. 6d.
Modern Short Stories. *Lovat Dickson.* 3s. 6d.
The Longest Years. By SIGRID UNDSËT, translated by ARTHUR G. CHATER. *Cassell.* 7s. 6d.
Tarabas, A Guest on Earth. By JOSEPH ROTH. *Heinemann.* 7s. 6d.
Woman Alive. By SUSAN ERTZ. *Hodder and Stoughton.* 5s.

From the romantic charm of the English landscape during the autumn and winter months, we cannot separate a certain touch of melancholy. In an attitude that suggests infinite resignation, an abandoned cart thrusts up its shafts against a pallid rainy sunset; pools of water shine, cold and metallic, among the furrows of a sodden ploughed field; yellow leaves lie flattened on the crown of the road. . . . It is a melancholy that we find—somewhat idealised—in the poems of Wordsworth and—more definitely expressed—in the verses of Crabbe. To-day, it supplies the background of many of Mr. H. E. Bates' finest short tales. Not that the element of gloom is melodramatised. For Mr. Bates is, above all things, a self-conscious artist. His scope is limited; but there are very few modern English writers who understand their own limitations so well or observe them so wisely. Every sentence—and this is surely one of the chief criteria of good writing—seems to perform a very definite function, quickly, vividly, without undue expenditure of words. *Cut and Come Again* maintains the high level set by Mr. Bates' previous volumes. It includes fourteen stories; and each of them forms a complete composition—produces a separate and, often, an extremely poignant effect. Take, for instance, one of his best and, incidentally, his longest short stories, *The Mill*—the account of how a young and very stupid country girl, farmed out to service by her miserly parents, is seduced by her employer, a middle-aged dealer in scrap-iron, and returns home pregnant. Between Mr. Bates' story and the story that Maupassant might have written on the same theme, there is as great a difference as exists between the English and the French countryside, or the characters of the English and French peasant. The personages of Mr. Bates' tale are dumb, patient, stolid. Their passions lack emphasis; while the country in which they live—across which Alice's father bumps early and late in his decrepit Ford van, selling rabbits, vegetables and flowers—has the flat, sad, monotonous colouring of a Fenland landscape.

Except by quotation, it is difficult to illustrate the qualities of Mr. Bates' prose style:

. . . Hearing nothing she walked across the yard. Beyond the piles of rusted iron a sluice tore down past the mill-wall on a glacier of green slime. She stopped and peered down over the stone parapet at the water. Beyond the sluice a line of willows were shedding their last leaves, and the leaves came floating down the current like little yellow fish. She watched them come and surge through the grating, and then vanish under the water-arch. Then, watching the fish-like leaves, she saw a real fish, dead, caught in the rusted grating, thrown here by the force of descending water. Then she saw another, and another. Her eyes registered no surprise. She walked round the parapet, and then, leaning over and stretching, she picked up one of the fish. It was cold, and very stiff, like a fish of celluloid, and its eyes were like her own, round and glassy. Then she walked along the path, still holding the fish and occasionally looking at it. The path circled the mill-pond and vanished, farther on, into a bed of osiers. The mill-pond was covered in duck-weed,

the green crust split into blackness here and there by chance currents of wind or water. The osiers were leafless, but quite still in the windless air. And standing still, she looked at the tall osiers for a moment, her eyes reflecting their stillness and the strange persistent absence of all sound.

I have transcribed the above extract, not because it strikes me as sensorially fine, but because it is entirely adequate to the scene and the mood represented. The author's style is neither slipshod nor over-written. It is precise, simple, straightforward, never descending to colloquialism or offending by the traces of archaism that are sometimes the result of undue attention to the niceties of prose. Mr. Manhood, on the other hand, seldom allows us to forget that he is an accomplished writer, versed in all the tricks, and saturated in the jargon of his trade. His stories are neat but rather unsatisfying. In the effort to write vividly, he is apt to write clumsily; and we read of an airman, walking towards his machine, who "wooden-skittled across the sun-scorched grass . . . smoke tufting from his cigarette like a thin substitute for the stuff of clouds." Now and then, he misuses an image so that it becomes completely meaningless—"dusk was settling like grape-bloom on a ripened earth"—or overworks his sense of the picturesque, as when he remarks that a fighting-cock's spurs in their case "looked oddly like the talons torn from an eagle with rags of flesh still hanging, looked like the soul of a murderer . . ."; while I find it hard to forgive the innkeeper's wife, whose "lip was bleeding where she had bitten it over-hard . . ."

Whereas Mr. Bates has made the short story his vocation—*Cut and Come Again* is far better value than the novel which preceded it—the authors represented in the admirable Cresset Library have all reached short-story writing from other fields of literary endeavour, in which they have achieved, most of them, a considerable degree of popular success. Here is Mr. Graham Greene—always competent and entertaining; Mr. James Laver—extremely adroit when he manages to give whimsicality a wide berth; Miss Sylvia Townsend Warner and Mrs. Valentine Dobrač. Mrs. Dobrač, one of the least known, shows up, as it happens, to the greatest advantage. Her first story—inspired, no doubt, by reminiscences of Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*—depicts an old-

fashioned servant, a devoted caretaker, whose existence is dominated by the prestige of the empty house to which she attends and her memories of the family by which it was once inhabited.

Every reader who considers that the average modern novel is much too expensive and that the contents of an ordinary novel might often be expressed within the limits of a long short story, will welcome these neat, silver-jacketed Cresset books, each of which includes three or four short stories, yet costs only three-and-sixpence. . . . *Modern Short Stories* is more indigestible. It includes stories by such distinguished practitioners as Martin Armstrong, L. A. G. Strong, André Maurois and A. Calder Marshall, accompanied by others of less note. The selection is catholic; but I cannot help feeling that short stories should be written for individual enjoyment, and that, among a score of companions, good and bad, even the best short story is inclined to lose a great deal of its lustre.

Novels, this week, are somewhat heterogeneous. *The Longest Years* is all that Sigrid Undset's numerous admirers have learned to expect—the narrative of an eventful but not unduly dramatic childhood, measured, well written, richly detailed, yet haunted by that slight stodginess which, at any rate in translation, is one of the characteristics of Scandinavian prose. *Tarabas, A Guest on Earth*, the work of an exiled German-Jewish novelist, Joseph Roth, is half-realistic novel, half-legend or fable. *Tarabas* has committed a murder during his youth. He returns to Russia from America, is caught up in the revolution, establishes himself as petty dictator during the civil war and dies in a monastic cell, having expiated his crimes.

In *Woman Alive*, Miss Susan Ertz, whose talents up till now have been confined to the sphere of the modern domestic novel, has launched out on to the stormy seas of prophecy and pacifist propaganda. During a short but exceptionally savage European War, a disease is disseminated that carries off the entire feminine population. The only survivor is a hearty, healthy, hitherto not particularly attractive, virgin who has earned a meagre living as games' mistress at a conventional English school. Naturally, this sole surviving female becomes the object of a quasi-religious cult. Naturally, she exploits the advantages of her position. Rather unwillingly, she allows herself to be installed, a semi-divine Queen Bee, at Buckingham Palace, and, as a condition of agreeing to carry on the race, makes her own terms, lectures the government, delivers broadcast talks, and generally does her best to bring quarrelsome and unreasonable masculinity to its senses. . . . Impossible not to admire the enlightened intentions with which Miss Ertz would appear to have set forth; impossible to repress an occasional shudder at the realisation of her plan. Stella is so very much the games' mistress—her harangues so entirely devoid of humour—that by comparison the actual world seems an earthly paradise. As Henry James is said to have observed at a vulgar luncheon party: "*Murder and rapine would be preferable to this!*"

PETER QUENNEL



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