

Current Literature

BOOKS IN GENERAL

I REMEMBER as a child reading of some occasion when a bookmaker was torn to pieces by an angry crowd and when other bookmakers were taken into custody by the police, and though I believed that a bookmaker was the same thing as a publisher, I was not very much surprised. From what I had heard drop from my father's lips about publishers, they probably deserved all they got. To be sure I could not imagine my father's extremely respectable employers, Mr. Gerald Duckworth and Mr. Milsted, in any such predicament, but I had always been told that they were exceptions to the general rule. The distinction between betting on horses and publishing books was afterwards explained, but, owing to my first mistake, the two trades still remain associated in my mind. I know that really they are unconnected, yet I still unconsciously tend to couple them together and to think of each trade in the terms of the other. In one particular branch, however, I have come to realise a very great distinction. The reviewer and the racing tipster, though they both make a pretence of using exceptional gifts to fulfil the same function, now serve opposite ends. The tipster pretends to tell you which is the best horse and which will win; the reviewer gets his reputation for intelligence and brilliance by pointing out the incurable defects of the gee-gees that also ran. We all like to make merry at the expense of some booby who has written a bad book. There is no simple pleasure to be got from being told a book is good and that one ought to read it. And to be told that an author is very good indeed, that one would do well to read all his books, is a very serious matter. Before even listening to such advice the reader seeks for a way out. He purses up his lips, shakes his head and taps his forehead and says to himself: "This Johnny is always talking about masterpieces and works of art. Rather unbalanced, poor fellow. He has no judgment at all."

A House of Women, by H. E. Bates (Cape, 7s. 6d.), is the best novel that he has so far written; indeed it is the first of his novels which I should rank as a finished work of art above the best of his short stories. This means that it is very good indeed: a novel of the very front rank which one will be sure to re-read in ten and again perhaps in twenty years' time. Bates is a prolific writer who writes easily; sometimes too easily; and many of his sketches, like many of Tchegov's, are quite trivial. He has also an astonishingly sensitive ear for the style of other men. In his best stories, an echo of Turgenev, Tchegov, Tolstoy, Stephen Crane, or even of Waley's *Translations from the Chinese*, has frequently sounded, as though a ghostly presence had passed like a breath of wind, ruffling the midland cornfields and the waters of the Nene. The effect is as though you had asked at the dairy door for a glass of milk warm from the cow, and the farmer's daughter had suddenly revealed by a stray word that she had just been reading *Kubla Khan*. It gives one a thrill of shared pleasure and of intimate understanding. Such sensibility to the work of others is a distinguishing mark of the true artist in his youth. Every great painter, or great poet, reveals I think in his early work the influence, not of a formulated tradition, but of the ever-sounding voices of the dead painters and poets who first showed him the:

bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace latch or catch or key to keep
Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty . . . from vanishing
away.

The secret which, if we do not believe in a miraculous *Golden Echo*, belongs only to poets and artists.

An intense feeling for natural beauty, for every blade of grass and every sound in the dew-soaked May morning, for the enchanted dreams of childhood was the feature of Bates's

early work. It was saturated with impressions, and the reader sometimes felt as though he were looking at things through a quivering mirage: there was a difficulty about keeping them in focus. This fault (together with many others) showed itself in Bates's first book, *The Two Sisters*, and it persisted in that vastly better novel, *Catharine Foster*, and in stories like *The Woman Who Had Imagination*, though there is perfect solidity about the whole setting of that story. In *Charlotte's Row*, Bates showed a harder, more realistic side. He was writing not of the emotions of youth, but of his home town without softening or idealising anything. But just because of that he was ill at ease with his subject, he longed to get away from his characters as he himself had always longed to get out of the streets into woods and cornfields that hang over the valley of bootmakers. In *The Mill* (a story in the best volume of his stories *Cut and Come Again*) every trace of hampering adolescent hyper-sensibility had vanished. The story is clear, peculiarly grim and horrible, but without a single touch of exaggeration, or of love of the horrible. It is one of the great short stories in English. The same grimness, the same perfectly clear focusing and the same absence of exaggeration mark *A House of Women*.

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The setting of the novel has a good deal in common with *The Fallow Land* and *The Poacher*, but in clarity and grimness it is more like *The Mill*. Fine as those novels were, the advance here is enormous. What I think has happened is this. Most novelists write partly from memory and partly from imagination, and Bates is a writer whose memory is particularly richly stocked with impressions of childhood. In his earlier novels he has taken remembered characters and woven them into a story full of new situations. But they were always liable to reveal the fact of their transplantation; at certain moments even they somehow "slipped" and unity was destroyed. Something of this kind I remember happened in *The Poacher*. There was a sort of timelessness, a feeling that however long the characters lived they never changed the year in which they were living, or the superficial habits of their lives, which was because all the characters were taken from Bates's memories of real people when he was a boy. In *A House of Women*, Bates probably started with his memories also, but the characters have come alive in a quite different way. Instead of being inserted into the story, their development rules the book, and makes it what it is.

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Rosie Perkins, the daughter of a scoundrelly old publican, takes charge of the book just as she takes charge of the farm after she has married Tom and as she runs it while he is away at the war and after he returns a cripple. The jealousy of Tom's family is told at the start:

Frankie rubbed his hand backwards and forwards, feeling the young moustache. It was growing nicely; the fine young hairs prickly as the new thorns on a raspberry cane. Tom had a good strong moustache, light brown, thickening. And looking from the sky to Tom, Frankie could see Tom caressing his moustache too, and a little flicker of jealousy went through him . . . when there were neither binders nor crops of barley nor anything else beyond their own world for them to envy, they were jealous of and among themselves, Frankie jealous of Tom's moustache, the girls jealous of each other, the mother jealous for each of them in turn against the other.

Rosie gets the full force of it, and no wonder: she has a magnificent figure, an illegitimate child and she says "blimey" every time she opens her mouth. Tom's sisters and aged mother, growing childish, watch her every movement with the eternal, implacable hate of three starved cats watching a robust bull-terrier licking its chops. And she triumphs over them and survives them all. Even Tom can't kill her, though he comes too near doing it for the reader's comfort. Incidentally a great part of the book is written in the exact language of the characters. *A House of Women* is a novel with the power and the solidity of writing of D. H. Lawrence at his best. In spite of these merits I venture to tip it as a winner.

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