

Fiction

By ADRIAN BELL

Greengates. By R. C. Sherriff. (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.)
A House of Women. By H. E. Bates. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
Miss Linsey and Pa. By Stella Gibbons. (Longmans. 7s. 6d.)
May Day. By John Sommerfield. (Lawrence and Wishart. 7s. 6d.)

The Sounding Cataract. By J. S. Collis. (Cassell. 7s. 6d.)

How rarely one meets with a complete novel; not, that is, just a well-made novel, but one that is completely experienced, whose success is both local and cumulative, with no undigested portions lying about, in which every detail tends towards the whole. Such a book is Mr. Sherriff's *Greengates*. The story concerns the attempt of Thomas Baldwin, a vigorous man of less than sixty, to adjust himself to freedom after a life of office routine. To his wife there is the problem of facing a relationship that has been a matter of day-ends and week-ends. His progress is from buoyancy to desperation. Then he sees, with his wife, a new house; the first of a new estate on the scene of a country walk of earlier days. At first they are disgusted at the defacement of the valley; then a glimpse of the modern interior startles and charms. It becomes for him something he can hardly formulate, but a breaking from the old life, a new chance. He and his wife become like young people again in their eagerness for it. After doubts, vicissitudes, despairs, it becomes theirs. The old Victorian house and furniture are replaced by a tiled bathroom and built-in cupboards. All this, told with fine domestic insight and humour, makes even exciting reading. But then Mr. Sherriff lifts his theme from a good tale to something more. The modern *décor*, having done its work of stimulation, falls into the background: it counts only as a symbol. What is important is the unformed community that is to inhabit houses yet unbuilt and meet on roads still only clay. Baldwin, on the impetus of another pioneer inhabitant, becomes a rallying point; he founds a club. (The scene of the inaugural meeting is great, with Baldwin's unpremeditated speech.) He finds himself as organiser of this new community, that it may escape the furtive wincing contacts of the old, which resulted in his odd-job desperate solitude when the thread of his office life was broken.

Mr. Sherriff so manages his materials that they stand like social fingerposts; without, at the same time, giving a naive *carte blanche* to "progress." He can imply, in a phrase, such transitions of feeling as (on the eve of selling up) "Mr. Baldwin dropped his umbrella in Lot 1, and hung his hat upon Lot 2." The impotence of the individual towards self-realisation except through social contact is the implicit emphasis of the story; the power of surroundings to stimulate character, its point of debate with the reader.

After this, Mr. Bates comes as a powerful depressant. Work, which is the salvation of Mr. Baldwin, assumes in *A House of Women* a daemonic aspect. It is the story of a barmaid, Rosie, true to type, with her pseudo-expertness with men, yet underneath a total incapacity to cope with circumstance either one way or the other; either by resignation or rebellion. "All right, I'll try anything once" is her characteristic retort; and in that kind of mood she marries into a farming family, with whom of course she is at odds; though more so, one feels, with her own disposition, her discontinuous kind of volition. To recount the tale would be little more than totalling calamities—the bovine Tom prostrated and made maniacal by a war-wound, the drowning of his brother Frankie, the death of his mother, of his sister, of himself, of everyone almost except Rosie. The abhorred shears are hard at work: only one feels they are not abhorred but welcome, so intensely does Mr. Bates convey that hard and hopeless quality of people emotionally anaesthetised by overwork, in whom desire for the light is stilled to something like the nagging of an angry tooth. There is never any slackening of the pressure of circumstance, so that neither Rosie nor the others have the opportunity, if they had the inclination, to find themselves. They snap futilely at their bonds and succeed only in wounding one another.

The book opens in an atmosphere of thunder in a hayfield; and there is a charged feeling throughout, which explodes in flashes of dialogue but is not dissipated. Whether it is a picture of hay-swathes or a moment of passion, all is lit by

the intense stare of storm-light. The book is to be read as a study in the moods of doom, and Mr. Bates exploits them to the full. There is lacking the high inevitability that would turn them into tragedy.

Miss Linsey is the no longer young daughter of an unsuccessful tradesman, and her time is divided between her own people and the queer intelligentsia for whom she works. She and her father come to London, to live in lodgings found for them by Len, a cousin of near forty, still bemused by an adolescent dream of a girl he met in France. The lodgings are kept by erotic Mrs. Fell, with a fantastic madman in the background who keeps a den of caged birds. The book really falls into two parts: the life of the lodgings and the free-love-and-all-that brigade. Miss Linsey's own people are rather dim: there is a sense always about them of the half light of an over-curtained room, and one fails somehow quite to get into touch with them. Miss Linsey herself is described by a relative as an interfering sort; but the way she interferes is not so much individual as typical. She is just a good scandalisable body. But the people of Bloomsbury really give Miss Gibbons something to bite on. That they are an obvious Aunt Sally for anyone feeling exuberantly normal to have a shy at, and have been for some time, does not lessen our entertainment in the present case. There is the almost traditional week-end cottage scene—the Washing Up, the Beam-Bashing, the Frisky Horse, &c. On the whole, though, Miss Gibbons seems undecided whether to be serious or inconsequential in *Miss Linsey and Pa*. An excerpt from a "stark" novel by one of her characters underlines her true gift—parody.

The kind of thing that Miss Gibbons ought to have exploded is a major fault of *May Day*. It is the idea that to say "The alarm clock sprays a jet of noise into the eardrums" is better than "The alarm clock goes off." Mr. Sommerfield's rhetorical prologues are not encouraging: "... factory chimneys, cannons trained at dingy skies..." &c. But his story is better than that, though the same impressionistic astigmatism runs through it. It is a social indictment: it attempts to be comprehensive, to catch up individual lives at different levels and carry them along together in the swirl of history in the making. The tactic succeeds better than might have been expected, *i.e.*, the dropping of one character to take up another; but there are two drawbacks. One is that in such a social document the things that most rouse the reader are the facts; machinery not properly guarded in factories, &c., &c. Unless such things are true (in a typical sense) the book might be a story of oppression in Ruritania. But Mr. Sommerfield's style fails to give the reader confidence in his validity where it is needed. The second drawback is that the people have not character but mass characteristics, because it suits him as mass propagandist that their individuality should be ignored, just as it suits their capitalist masters. Ten thousand people are no more human than one, and you do not enlarge the humanity of your tale by bringing the whole street into it. There is too much outside to *May Day*. For all its crowds, it fails to touch the problem of community.

The Sounding Cataract opens also on a note of rebellion. Robert Delaney, caught up in Irish civil war, is overcome by a sense of God and super-political destiny at dawn on a mountain, when he is in a tight corner. After hairbreadth escapes, enhanced by the author's power of describing Nature in catastrophic mood, Robert escapes to London. So far all is exciting, expert. For while in London the cosmic outlook is sustained—the Thames mysterious in fog, a warehouse fire, the shadowing of an enemy. This desperado being throttled and flung into the river, our hero (it seems natural to call him that) sets out to conquer London. Here, alas, he fails. Not that he lacks a surprising success in getting a job on a paper; but the hum-drum refuses to be lifted out of its rut, even with headline journalism as ally. A Buchmanite house party, in which God is referred to in a sort of American radio sales blague, makes the reader weep for the dastardly days in old Ireland; for there indeed God was a mystery, even if you got shot in the back. So does Robert, and eventually he returns there, and to his first love.