

FICTION

By FORREST REID

Spella Ho. By H. E. Bates. (Cape. 8s. 6d.)
The Sword in the Stone. By T. H. White. (Collins. 8s. 6d.)
Green Volcano. By Jim Phelan. (Peter Davies. 7s. 6d.)

I WAS only a boy at the time, but I can remember the storm of indignation aroused by the publication of *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy was at that period my favourite novelist, and I read the new book with a deep and almost passionate sympathy. I, too, was indignant, but my indignation was on the other side. Here, it seemed to me, was a masterpiece—tragic, human, and breathing the very spirit of compassion. It moved me profoundly, and intellectually and spiritually it appealed to all that was most moral in my nature. Nevertheless there were influential critics—Mrs. Oliphant among them—who accused the author of deliberately pandering to the baser instincts of his readers. Other times, other manners; and now I find myself in the camp of the puritans.

Yet is it precisely the same thing? One of the features of modern fiction (I refer to such novels as deal with the relations of the sexes) is its outspokenness, and it is largely this outspokenness, I am afraid, that I find distasteful. Mr. Bates's *Spella Ho*, for instance, is definitely on the side of morality, and is written with an integrity of purpose that is in itself moral, yet it contains more than one passage—in the talk of Rufus Chamberlain—that jarred upon me. I admit that the talk is true to life, and that, given a type like Chamberlain, if his actual words are to be reported Mr. Bates is perfectly justified. Where, however, I think he has deliberately handicapped himself, is in taking such a man as Bruno Shadbolt for his hero. It was the opinion of Aristotle that, in a work of imagination, the choice of subject and the choice of characters are of primary importance. And they are. By choosing a hero like Shadbolt the novelist deliberately sacrifices that finer kind of interest which arouses sympathy and constitutes charm. For I do not agree with the verdict expressed on the wrapper of the book, that Shadbolt was a great man. He is a man with only two ideas in his head—money and women—and the novel is a record of his pursuit of both. The fact that his achievement is on a larger scale than usual means nothing—at all events is no criterion of greatness. One sympathises with him while he is still a sullen, unawakened, young peasant who can neither read nor write, but with the dawn of his ambition sympathy dwindles, for it is a paltry and selfish ambition, and the determination with which he follows it cannot alter its nature. And so with his love affairs. To return for a moment to *Jude*: in that novel we get a young man with a pronounced weakness for women, yet the fascination and tragic power of the book do not lie in the presentation of physical passion, but in a conflict between the spirit and the flesh. Had Jude been incapable of that conflict, had he been dead to the spiritual world, had he not first been presented to us as a boy, tender-hearted, affectionate, lovable, there would have been no tragedy worthy of the name. And it is because Shadbolt has no spiritual life, because his qualities of courage, endurance, and determination are employed solely to gain his own ends, that his successive love experiences leave us unmoved, though three of them end in death and the fourth in desertion.

I say this reluctantly, for there is much in the novel I admire. I admire its sincerity; I admire the writing, which is always that of an artist. The opening scenes in particular have a kind of grim poetry. But the beauty lies in the scenic background—in the great empty house that Bruno explores; in the snowstorm and the cold bleak landscape. I began at this point to hope that Mr. Bates had written a pastoral novel which might rank perhaps with *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and I still see no reason why he should not one day do so, though *Spella Ho* is not the book.

Empedocles, who remembered his past lives as clearly as most of us remember our schooldays, tells us (what indeed we might have expected) that in not all of them was he sent into the world a boy. Once he had been born a girl, once a plant, once a bird, and once "a darting fish in the sea." I place the nativities in the order he himself places them, which, beginning with the fish, might indicate a gradually upward progress were it not for the unexpected intervention of the plant. But

Empedocles does not tell us what happened to him nor what he did in those lives, and that is where Wart, the juvenile hero of *The Sword in the Stone*, has an advantage. For Wart's experiences, though unconnected with the doctrine of metempsychosis, are almost equally wide, thanks to his tutor, the wizard Merlyn, who takes this method of educating him. There is another boy in the tale, but he does not matter; the adventures are the Wart's. Unfortunately they vary considerably in interest owing to the length of the book, which is longer than the two *Alices* put together. Lewis Carroll knew exactly when to stop, and that in this kind of tale particularly, quality means more than quantity. Mr. White is less discriminating: his best chapters are delightful, and had he cut out the others—the less imaginative, the Robin Hood episode for instance—he would have increased enormously the value of the whole. Here is a sample. The two boys have strayed into a witch's dominion, but Merlyn comes to their rescue, and a duel, of the orthodox kind between witch and wizard, immediately ensues. I can only give its conclusion.

"Poor Merlyn, beginning to lose his nerve, turned wildly into an elephant—this move usually won a little breathing space—but Madame Mim, relentless, changed from the falcon into an aulay on the instant. An aulay was as much bigger than an elephant as an elephant is larger than a sheep. It was a sort of horse with an elephant's trunk. Madame Mim raised this trunk into the air, gave a shriek like a railway engine, and rushed upon her panting foe. In a flick Merlyn had disappeared.

"One," said Hecate. "Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine—"

"But before the fatal Ten which would have counted him out, Merlyn reappeared in a bed of nettles, mopping his brow. He had been standing among them as a nettle.

"The aulay saw no reason to change its shape. It rushed upon the man before it with another piercing scream. Merlyn vanished again just as the thrashing trunk descended, and all stood still a moment, looking about them, wondering where he would step out next.

"One," began Hecate again, but even as she proceeded with her counting, strange things began to happen. The aulay got hiccoughs, turned red, swelled visibly, began whooping, came out in spots, staggered three times, rolled its eyes, fell rumbling to the ground. The ingenious magician had turned himself successively into the microbes, not yet discovered, of hiccoughs, scarlet fever, mumps, whooping cough, measles and heat spots, and from a complication of all these complaints the infamous Madame Mim had immediately expired."

This quotation will show the kind of novel Mr. White has written. It hovers somewhere between *Through the Looking Glass* and Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, being less a dream tale than the former, and lacking the philosophic purpose of the latter. We are at once in Arthurian and modern times: the Wart, in fact, is eventually revealed as the youthful Arthur. Mr. White clearly enjoyed writing the book, and a good many people, young and old, will enjoy reading it.

Green Volcano is the third novel by Mr. Phelan I have reviewed within five months, and I wish it had been preceded by an author's note. For obviously there is something unusual here. Mr. Phelan's first novel, *Lifer*, I praised; his second, *Ten-a-Penny People*, disappointed me; his third, *Green Volcano*, is much better than his second, though, from the more familiar nature of its subject, less striking than his first. Yet *Ten-a-Penny People* is written in the manner of *Lifer*, *Green Volcano* is not; while, on the other hand, *Green Volcano* contains an episode which had already been used in *Lifer*. How is one to tell where Mr. Phelan stands, whether he is progressing or retrogressing? The only thing that seems sure is that the books were not written in the order of their publication.

The present novel deals with the Irish troubles, and is a good book of its kind, well written, firmly constructed, and with sufficient incident to bring it almost into the class of adventure stories. It has indeed something of the excitement of a thriller, for the plot turns on the identification of a spy, who has betrayed the hero's father and got him fifteen years imprisonment. The book reveals an aspect of the war new to me, much of it being concerned with the intrigues of the rival secret services. The characters are alive, and the action develops swiftly, without digressions. Luckily, too, it breaks off before Mr. Phelan has time to spoil it: the hydra of propaganda is just beginning to raise its head when the curtain is rung down.