

Novels of the Week

THE VILLAGE SATYR

SPELLA HO. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 8s. 6d.

Are there half a dozen novelists to-day who offer as much pleasure as Mr. Bates in his best work? There are certainly not more. One comes to him in the knowledge that he has no taste for a show of sophistication, none of the pretensions of the novelist with a purpose, no affectations of prose style, nothing of the latest touch that is so soon out of date. These things apart, one does not easily tire of the varying poetic moods

of his stories, the freshness and grace of his descriptions of the countryside, the intuitive delicacy of his studies of old people and children. Like every good storyteller, he creates freely within boundaries of his own choosing. A small canvas with two or three characters only in the foreground serves him best. In his novels, as in his short stories, it is the illumination of a small familiar scene, of a moment of unambitious experience, that enables him to take beauty, as beauty must be taken, by surprise.

"Spella Ho," his latest novel, is a longer and more elaborately designed book than any he has attempted hitherto. Mr. Bates sets out to follow the fortunes of Bruno Shadbolt from the seventies of the past century, when he was a wretchedly poor, illiterate, almost brutish village youth, to lonely and memory-ridden old age in the great house in which he had served, which he had coveted and eventually made his own. As soon as he had learned to reason Bruno, like the hero of a Balzac novel, came to see that only two things mattered in life, women and money. It is his pursuit of these ends that principally engages Mr. Bates. And, with the best will in the world, it is impossible to say that he has made a success of his story. There are scenes and incidents that are recognizably his and his alone, winter and summer landscapes of an enchanting exactness. But the vision of distant horizons that he seeks to fashion in the experience of his hero is shifting and cloudy, as though the experience itself were imperfectly realized. If one may venture the suggestion, the theme he has chosen here does not match his distinctive talent.

The potential greatness that Mr. Bates tries to uncover in Bruno Shadbolt is never

apparent to the reader. Passion flickers for a moment in him, and here and there one can glimpse a thwarted groping towards beauty; but for the most part he is merely powerful and dumb, a lustful and intensely masculine creature of instinct that is only dimly apprehended. Perhaps the truth is that Bruno is not an altogether homogeneous character; the village satyr who "went rioting

on election nights, fighting drunk, and in between times fathering easy bastards for miles down and up the river" is also the great lover who woke tender and enduring passions in one virtuous woman after another. Louise—who taught him to read and write—the companion of the half-crazed old woman who owned Spella Ho; Gerda, the German wife of the local doctor; Italian Jenny, the gay music-hall dancer, at heart unspoilt; the fastidious and intellectual Lady Virginia—all suffered no hesitations or doubts, but loved completely and at once. Mr. Bates is less than convinc-

ing in the matter.

It may seem ungenerous to persist in criticism, but it is because expectation is rightly pitched high on the appearance of a new book from Mr. Bates that one further comment should be made. Paradoxically enough, a novelist has often most to fear from his greatest gifts. Mr. Bates in this novel too frequently resorts to an apt and charming descriptive passage when what the story would seem to require is a deepening of emotion or an increase of tension. His mastery of the short-story technique has led him, we think, to over-simplify the treatment of his subject here and so fall short of his effects. Criticism over, there remains much for which one is grateful. As in "The Poacher" and other novels of his, there are pictures of snow falling on the fields that stay in the mind. There is, too, a quite unselfish and unforgettable picture of poverty in the early part of the book, when the half-starved Shadbolt children march round the icy-cold room to keep themselves warm, singing hymns at the bidding of their mother, herself dying and dead that same night. Here is the true and vivid perception, with the added touch of authentic strangeness, that makes Mr. Bates's best work a poetic and moving interpretation of life.

RECOMMENDED

FICTION

FIRST CHOICE

SPELLA HO. By H. E. BATES.

DR. BRADLEY REMEMBERS. By FRANCIS BRET YOUNG.

TESTAMENT. By R. C. HUTCHINSON.

IMAGES IN A MIRROR. By SIGRID UNDBRET.

THE SWORD IN THE STONE. By T. H. WHITE.

MISS PETTIGREW LIVES FOR A DAY. By WINIFRED WATSON.

ROYAL REGIMENT. By GILBERT FRANKAU.

COMING OUT. By WINIFRED PECK.