

NEW NOVELS

UNCHANGING HUMAN NATURE

DR. BRADLEY REMEMBERS. By FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG. Heinemann. 8s. 6d.
SPELLA HO. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 8s. 6d.
IMAGES IN A MIRROR. By SIGRID UNDSSET. Cassell. 7s. 6d.
THE SWORD IN THE STONE. By T. H. WHITE. Collins. 8s. 6d.

Does human behaviour change with the passing of the years? Three of the novels under review raise this question as they are mainly concerned with problems of behaviour. "Dr. Bradley Remembers" and "Spella Ho" give us panoramas of the Victorian scene passing into modern days with a large and socially comprehensive range of characters, while in Sigrid Undset's story of modern life the main interest is in the behaviour of one woman faced with a problem of conduct. But, although the dressing of the scene is different in the beginning of the two English novels, the characters behave, as human beings have done since the dawn of history, in very much the same way as the "moderns," with all their emancipation and subtlety and sophistication; they are actuated by the same forces—greed, duty, ambition, love, and honour, whether they have been to the best schools or to no school at all, and their rejoicing and suffering follow well-worn patterns.

MR. BRETT YOUNG'S DOCTOR

In "Dr. Bradley Remembers" Mr. Brett Young takes us back to "North Bromwich" Hospital and the industrial Midlands of pre-Lister days, when "hospitalism" was responsible for more deaths than actual disease or accident, when surgeons operated with unwashed overalls and the floors of operating theatres were covered in sawdust on to which ligatures and dressings occasionally fell. He shows a medical profession fighting such pioneers as Lister and Pasteur tooth and nail and bitterly opposed to even such State control of Health Services as the National Health Insurance Act. His human story to which this struggle is the background is tragic, and in the end the old doctor is left with about £4,000 of book-debts and enough money to bring him an annuity of £150. Most of his personal relationships have failed; he cannot look back on any days of ease or reward; but his duty to his patients, hampered as it has been by his ignorance, embittered by his desire to do better, has brought him serenity and happiness. This book, prolix though its style may be after all, an old man's memories are apt to wander from the point, is one of those in which the reader can immerse himself with a completeness usually given only to family gossip, and it leaves behind it the impression of high endeavour motivated by something fundamental in human nobility.

The same cannot be said of Mr. Bates's long novel. Bruno Shadbolt, when we meet him in 1873, is a starving ragamuffin left unprotected by his mother's death and his father's desertion. He does not even know the value of the coins he has to handle when he starts a carrier's business with the horse and cart his father has left behind; but he rapidly discovers that his virility and a rather bitter insolence coupled with his excessive ugliness can win his way with women. He becomes a sort of bailiff to the terrible old lady who owns Spella Ho, the vast mansion that has dominated his village all his life, and when she dies she leaves him a considerable fortune. Before this, however, he has had two disastrous love affairs; it is as though Bruno Shadbolt's aura brings death to those he loves—death for which he is not responsible, although his responsibility for the death of his lovely Lady Virginia (it is not clear why she is "Lady") is undoubted. His marriage to Italian Jenny brings financial success in spite of terrible setbacks, but he never knows happiness; the Midas touch brings with it a curse. But it is in the pictures of an England that has now passed, pictures of horror as well as of beauty, that the strength of Mr. Bates's novel lies, as well as in the brutally primitive self-seeking of most of the many "characters" who fill the pages. Here is no story of duty or high endeavour but a sketch of narrow lives ever growing narrower, bewildered by unhappiness but never trying to understand its cause.

SCANDINAVIAN LIGHT

It is a relief to turn to the sad but beautiful story of Uni Hjelde and her husband Kristian, suffused as it is by the clear white light of sincerity and simplicity that seems peculiar to Scandinavian novelists. Uni had been an actress, fairly successful, but motherhood and the death of a baby had driven her from the stage into her narrow, rickety poor home. For a little while she dallies with the idea of a love affair with an old school friend who brings thrill and excitement and some sort of artistic outlet. But in the end Uni says, as she parts with her would-be lover, "I can see that there is something wonderful and enticing in misfortune as in good fortune, in irresponsibility and revolt as in devotion to duty and obedience," and we leave her tucking her baby warmly in its cot, not happy but with a capacity for happy and serene life through her wisdom. This is a profound and memorable work, full of gentleness and calm.

Mr. White's book is one of those about which it is impossible to be lukewarm; those who like phantasy will revel in it; those who dislike phantasy will find it quite unreadable. It is sometimes reminiscent of "Alice in Wonderland," sometimes of "Water Babies"; next, one is reminded of Kenneth Grahame, yet all the time the author's touch is quite individual. We follow the Wart through his many adventures in a world where heraldic beasts are his friends and where Robin Hood (but his real name is Robin Wood) and Maid Marian sing Shakespeare songs while the hedgehog obliges with "Sweet Genevieve" and "Home, Sweet Home." There is a delicious description of Merlyn's room, which has a nook-patch of furniture like that of a wildly improbable dream, and a wistful account of the marshalling of embryos before the Almighty before Creation. But the most charming picture is that of the Wart taking from the Stone the sword that shall reveal his true identity, which must remain the author's secret.

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