

PRIVATE WORLDS

By PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON

MENTION of modern English poetry suggests still, I suppose, Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, though fashions change rapidly, and new poets rise like star-shells; but mention of the modern English short story would inevitably call to mind three writers long in residence at the forefront—Bates, Coppard and Manhood. I can think of no close challengers.

Of these three, **Mr. H. E. Bates** is the most erratic artist; he can be both best and worst; and these uncertainties are, I think, attributable to the fact that he is the most experimental. His work, despite its strong individuality, is never constant. An eager mind moves it, and an adventurous spirit unafraid of being bogged, now and then, on the road to a brighter and more promising objective. Mr. Bates's new collection of stories, **The Beauty of the Dead** (Cape, 7s. 6d.), illustrates this restless exploration, source of many small failures but so many more successes, more sharply than do any of his previous garnerings. All are tales of human bondage; all have that delicate luminosity by which visions are seen more clearly than in the bright sunlight; all are sombre in theme; and all are oddly untouched by the convulsions of a world that holds within it, like a Chinese box, so many billions of personal worlds moving within the universe of personal experience. Indeed, I find it hard to comprehend how Mr. Bates keeps his own world so inviolate.

Of the fifteen tales in this book, five—the title story, *The Bridge*, *Old*, *The Earth*, and *The Little Jeweller* are exceptionally good: they show Mr. Bates at his most experimental and at his most successful, and the last three admirably demonstrate how economy of words can send a theme pitching to the very brink of sentimentality—and hold it there, gripped, mastered, perfectly poised. Two stories, *Fuchsia* and *Quartette*, are flimsy as tissue paper and give a most misleading

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effect of immaturity. They are the sort of tales the late A. R. Orage must have found by the score upon his desk in those days when he was the hope and terror of young writers who could not judge their own strength or weakness.

Of course Mr. Bates is sentimental; but he is not often a sentimentalist. He has too much discipline, too much experience of poetic control. *The Beauty of the Dead* is about an antique dealer who, while he leaves his dying wife in a cold room, feeds her on hotted-up rice pudding and refuses her a nurse, yet prepares for her the most honourable tribute and pledge of love that his mind can conceive. It is a tragedy of cold and hunger beatified by the strangeness of human love.

"In the bedroom the blinds were still undrawn and the room was filled with the strong light of the snow. It melted in the shining surfaces of walnut and mahogany and hung on the ceiling like a cotton sheet. It struck brightly in his eyes after the gloom of the stairs, filling him with momentary tiredness."

The Bridge is a queer study of a paralysis of hatred between two sisters; *Old* is a new arabesque upon the hackneyed theme of the aged unwanted who dreads "the Union"; *The Earth* is a chilling tale of idiot's delight, of how the cherished simpleton grows to dominate and ruin the parents who loved him; and *The Little Jeweller* is a queer, Rumpelstilzkin nightmare of madness and the mind in chains.

If these are not cheerful stories, neither are they morbid. They leave no bitter taste in the mouth, no resentment. They are real, yet as remote as the other end of the earth, which is, of course, as real as the end upon which we, with Archimedes, stand.