

Novels of the Week

THE CHEHOV SPELL

THE BEAUTY OF THE DEAD AND OTHER STORIES. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 7s. 6d.

Discussion, solemn or less solemn, of what is styled the art of the short story has no doubt worked Chehov's name to death. All the same, nobody can help seeing what Chehov has done for the short story at the present time, especially in this country, where "the poetical English," as the literary minded in other countries have been known to speak of us, have taken him more closely to their bosom than others have. In England the short story of the better kind has for some time been very much a matter of poetic atmosphere, and poetic atmosphere in the short story, to put things boldly and briefly, may be said to be the principal Chehovian invention. Take any of a couple of dozen of the famous stories—*"The Lady with the Dog,"* say, or *"Gusev,"* or *"The Bishop."* In all of them the scene is bathed in a transparency of light in which vision goes beyond the immediate experience and stretches towards distant and illimitable horizons. That quality of vision, which for want of words is described as poetic, is peculiarly Chehov's, and English short-story writers have been peculiarly affected by his example. If there is one such writer in particular at the present time who seems to have absorbed the spell of atmosphere in Chehov it is Mr. H. E. Bates. Atmosphere is everything to Mr. Bates.

There are fifteen stories in this new collection of his, and several are in his best vein. In these the feeling is direct and unaffected, the description fresh and pictorially vivid, the perception of character just and unsentimental. What makes each of them memorable, however, is not so much any of these things as the momentary sharpness or delicacy of illumination in which the entire scene is caught, investing it with some particular mood of English landscape or of nature itself. In Mr. Bates's case, in fact, it is a picture—or, rather, the atmosphere of a picture—that tells a story. Perhaps the most characteristic specimen of his work in this volume is *"The Ferry,"* which evokes with an air of spontaneous accuracy the rain-washed landscape of a few miles of flooded fenland in winter. Again, it is the effect of snow falling that informs the title-story,

in which a miserly old man, a worshipper of the beautiful old furniture he has collected for years, prepares an elm coffin, with handsome scroll-work and old silver handles, for the dead woman who has starved herself in sharing his passion. At the end the beauty of the finished coffin and the beauty of the falling snow are for a moment identified in the old man's mind.

In stories such as these Mr. Bates's finely ordered strength and his limitations are alike obvious. Take away the poetic atmosphere and not a great deal remains. Mr. Bates, that is, is not Chehov; he is too restricted a story-teller, too static a painter of scenes, to unfold much more than meets the eye. Where his gift for atmosphere is well used, however, he has his own excellence, and imaginative limitations of one sort or another may be disregarded. Not so where he fails in atmosphere or tries to dispense with it. The second story in the book, for instance, *"The Bridge,"* evidently conceived at pure narrative, in which two sisters

compete for the love of a wax figure of a prodigious young engineer by the name of J. Eric Lawrence, can only be described as a complete flop, and an unintentionally comic one at that. There is nothing else in the volume nearly as bad, though there are three or four stories in which the elaboration of atmosphere peters out in somewhat trivial obscurity.

However, it would be unjust to Mr. Bates to dwell on the less successful examples of his work. A collection of this kind, the eighth he has given us, is almost bound to be of uneven merit, and what matters is that there are some half-dozen tales here that are not far short of the best he has written. Atmosphere apart, two are as nearly Chehovian in their mood of lyrical melancholy as anything he has turned out. These are *"Mr. Penfold,"* in which a timid little travelling draper is taken out of himself by the spectacle of young life and beauty, and *"Love is Not Love,"* which is full of true and delicately unspoken sentiment. Both stories have a touch of the fuller and more abundant sensibility that one always hopes to find in his work.

RECOMMENDED

GENERAL

THE WAR SPEECHES OF WILLIAM PITT. Selected by R. COUPLAND.

STAY ME WITH FLAGONS. By MAURICE HEALY.

STILL ALIVE WITH LUCAS. By HELEN RIEHM.

GREAT DAYS. By LIEUTENANT-COLONEL FRANK JOHNSON.

THE FLEETING OPPORTUNITY. By LIEUTENANT-COLONEL LORD GEORGE SCOTT.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE CUCKOO. By EDGAR P. CHANCE.

THE VOYAGE OF THE KAIMILOA. By ERIC DE BUSCHOP.

SAGITTARIUS RHYMING. By SAGITTARIUS.

FICTION

FIRST CHOICE

THE BEAUTY OF THE DEAD AND OTHER STORIES. By H. E. BATES.