

mechanism as powerful as the supernatural view of life" and the "life-centred cultural elements" are, in his closing words, "the impulse of love and spontaneity."

He rejects the messianic attitude but not its certainty. He restates certain fundamental Christian ethics while disclaiming religion. Because he is a poet as well as a lecturer in physiology, he reaches out beyond observable facts for truth, but it would be idle to pretend that his tract is a gospel. Such comment is not entirely fatuous seeing that Dr. Comfort is treating of our urgent and overwhelming concern—the future of man as a free spiritual being.

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## NEW NOVELS

**A Woman of Means.** By PETER TAYLOR. Routledge. 7s. 6d.

**The Lighted Cities.** By ERNEST FROST. Lehmann. 10s. 6d.

**The Scarlet Sword.** By H. E. BATES. Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

**Reprisal.** By ARTHUR GORDON. Hamish Hamilton. 9s. 6d.

Just after the war when publishers were looking around benevolently for the merest suspicion of an author to encourage, there was one phrase which the wily author needed to have pat. After the fantastic lunch, the huge cigars, the sympathetic discussion of the difficulties facing an author trying to make both ends meet, there would be the slightest possible pause and through the cigar smoke would come the kindly smiling question: "And this . . . this book you have in mind . . . what sort of thing do you think it might be about?" "Well, it's very difficult to say exactly, but . . . well, personal relationships, really and . . ." Enough, dear boy, enough. Waiter, two more double brandies. The contract is as good as signed.

We live now in sadder times when the books actually have to be written, but the label "personal relationships" still attaches itself a little awkwardly and ostentatiously to the better sort of novel, like Mr. Taylor's or Mr. Frost's. What is awkward, and what one slightly resents is that it should be necessary for an author to pick up the subject quite so clinically, and dangle it in front of us, when it is a subject which should be implicit in any book worth writing. Perhaps the depersonalisation of modern society, the necessity of drawing exaggerated attention to any personal values at all in contemporary life, has made this implicitness difficult to achieve. But one does long for a natural synthesis of personal relationships with plot and setting, and for the book's very virtue not to become, absurdly, an impediment, as is the case in different ways with *A Woman of Means* and *The Lighted Cities*.

*A Woman of Means* is concerned with a young American boy's relationship with his amiable, slightly hopeless, business executive father, and with the rich loving woman who becomes his stepmother. It is told by the boy, in the first person, with such authenticity and lack of affectation that one suspects—perhaps wrongly, and anyway, why not?—autobiography. In a haphazard, backward- and forward-looking anecdotal sort of way, Mr. Taylor slowly and sensitively builds up a picture of a rich but eccentric St. Louis household in the early Twenties. The boy's mother has died at birth. He follows his father around as he climbs the ladder of business success and then learns, in a memorable scene in an empty boardroom, of the impending marriage with the "woman of means." (One of Mr. Taylor's most impressive achievements is the conveying of a child's isolation in the face of adult relationships simultaneously with his awareness of the intensity of his own relationships.) It is a pleasure to find that for once a mixture of families (the woman of means has two silly daughters) does not lead to conventional conflict. The father gets on well with his stepdaughters; the stepmother dotes (from the first perhaps dangerously) on her son. Small details of life at home,

at school, in the business world, lull one into pleasurable anticipation. So far, so good. It is all very sensitively done: the characterisation of the father is brilliant; and Mr. Taylor's prose has a remarkable purity. (When American writing is as good as this, an American flavour actually seems an advantage to the English language.)

But there is a static quality about the book which makes one almost impatient with its merits. What right has Mr. Taylor, one asks oneself, to be so good at drawing people, and at probing deep into the secrets of their relationships, without doing more with them? Why aren't these small, kindly anecdotes, so delightfully told, collected more carefully into a mounting tension? They lie like pins spilt out of a box on to the floor, and one waits for the small but subtle magnet, which must surely be at work, to draw them together. But something has gone wrong. Either the magnet is not powerful enough or else it is being held too far away. When a development does take place—the tragic development towards which the book has presumably been moving all the time—it seems a little awkward and superimposed. One constantly wants *A Woman of Means* to be a sort of American *Olivia*, but it will not get under way.

There is development in *The Lighted Cities* and it is competently contrived, for Mr. Frost is, almost too self-consciously, professional. The book is set in post-war London, and it must be said at once that of all the attempts by young writers since the war to get that tattered and jaded, yet strangely affecting, old butterfly into the net, this is the most determined and ambitious. Not that it is wholly successful, because to catch the atmosphere of a place and a time effectively one must, of course, have more than local strength. Mr. Frost is first-class at conveying the feel of contemporary London in its squares and streets—that strange sensation of emotional tension and secret beauty in the hideous every-day. It is when he goes inside the houses that he is less good. There he shows us a number of contemporary Londoners hard at work on the full-time job of dealing with their emotional lives. But, in this case too, something has gone wrong. Mr. Frost's fault is over-clinical treatment of emotional problems so that they shrink and dry. It is dried blood that runs in the veins of Alexander Rainham, the elderly musician now sliding down the slope of poverty and failure towards death; of Arthur Godwin, the young musician with whom he has become emotionally obsessed, but who rejects him for Andreas Amanis, a sterile, sadistic London University don; dried blood in the veins of his handsome sensitive middle-aged wife. Only in the young man back from the wars who has an affair with the wife is there a little sensible warm motion. However, though he is too fond of his laboratory and would be improved by more field work, Mr. Frost is a writer of talent. He knows that personal relationships are more than just a matter of human being and human being, that they feed on the beauty and apparent triviality of the outside world. He knows that the flash of a passing bus in a junk shop's mirror, or the pattern of light and shade in a Bloomsbury Square, can become for a moment as important as the loved one's kiss. He has also a natural ear for funny incidental dialogue (that of a porter, a housekeeper, a man on a pavement). His front-line dialogue is, however, occasionally too slick and tight and reminds one again that the windows of the laboratory need opening.

*The Scarlet Sword* and *Reprisal* are both extravert books, concerned with intimate human relationships only as conventional phenomena. *The Scarlet Sword* is about a mixed collection of Europeans and Hindus, marooned and over-run by Pathans in a Catholic Mission in Kashmir in 1947. There are a number of stock characters—the fat, fumbling yet heroic priest, the war correspondent, the Anglo-Indian women, the tough little nurse with the heart of gold from the slums of Glasgow, the Hindu prostitute—and all are

joined together with consummate Times Furnishing Co. carpentry by Mr. Bates. There is a great deal of rape, and shooting and smashing of rifle-butts into backs and oil-lamps into faces, but the smell is neither of blood nor sweat nor cordite, but of the ink in Mr. Bates's pen. The scenery alone is real, reminding us that Mr. Bates has written more valuable books than this.

*Reprisal* has much more sincere feeling in it. It is a sober straightforward account of a Negro's attempt at revenge on a bunch of animal arrogant Southerners who raped and lynched his wife. Its moral is the obvious but never too often repeated one that violence only breeds more violence and that it is not a Coloured problem but a White problem that the Americans have in the South.

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