NEW SHORT STORIES.

The Grass God. By H. E. BATES. **Episode at Gastein.** By WILLIAM SANSOM. *Cornhill Supplement.* 2*s.* 6*d.*

A Single Lady and other Stories. By MARY LAVIN. *Michael Joseph.* 10*s.* 6*d.*

A Saint in the Making. By WILLIAM GOLDMAN. *Constellation Books.* 9*s.* 6*d.*

Hands to Dance. By CHARLES CAUSLEY. *Carroll & Nicholson.* 10*s.* 6*d.*

The *Cornhill* has been unfortunate in its first special number and the impressiveness of what at first sight seems a top-line "double-bill" hardly survives the title-page. Both authors, despite their skill and virtuosity, have produced only vivid exercises on trivial themes. Though Mr. Bates fails more completely than Mr. Sansom, they are involved together in what must, I fear, be the common refrain of this article—namely, the Decline of the Short Story.

Mr. Bates was always an evocative rather than a taut or astringent writer, but for a long time now his work has burgeoned with a new and dangerous exuberance. He would appear to have lost that distinctive candour, the art of an innocent eye, which once served him so well and which made *The Poacher* and stories like *The House with the Apricot* so moving. Reading his earlier books, one felt they were the work of a man who was seeing everything in nature for the first time. His corn, like Traherne's, "was orient and immortal wheat which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown." Instead of evoking his landscapes and peopling them with figures to correspond, the author now appears to rely on the naked shock of words and imagery to stun or hustle the reader into accepting his universe. In the event the result is disappointing.

The Grass God is about a middle-aged landowner whose love affair with a strange casually met girl lasts through one golden summer. Fitzgerald, despite his great possessions, is a dull enough country magnate, plagued by a jealous wife. His one passion in life is to make the grass on his estate greener. Held in thrall by his acres, he exists in a world of fertilizers, Sandgate beds and drainage, broken only by constant marital bickering, querulous nagging at the "new order" and nostalgia for the "twelve gardeners, with a number of apprentice boys" who once "raised delicious things in the old walled gardens and hot-houses sheltered from cold winds by Atlantic cedars." Into this lost lush-green paradise there comes, one spring evening, a young woman. The chance encounter between Fitzgerald and Cordelia results in an even more haphazard love affair. Then, at the first leaf of autumn and just as Fitzgerald has worked his wife round to considering a divorce, the young woman goes off, leaving him with a broken heart amid a dying landscape. The effect of the story is to leave the reader feeling bewildered and cheated in mid-air. One is moved by the scenery and the long green summer and never once by Fitzgerald himself.

Episode at Gastein is, on the surface at least, a shade more complicated. The time is the present, the place a small mineral spa in Karinthia. Herr Ludwig de Broda, 40, of independent means, is indulging his usual holiday pastime of recapturing the Hapsburgs. Here, he sighs as he threads his way among the mountain paths and craggy waterfalls, is where Franz Josef's carriage waited, this is where Bismarck stood and smoked his big cigars. But de Broda also wants to get married and when he meets Fraulein Laure he believes he has found the woman he is looking for. Laure is young, pretty and gay and works in a shop in Vienna. Though she is not interested in Franz Josef, they appear to get on well. Ludwig's self-conscious perfectionism prevents his proposing at the psychological moment and the girl goes off with a young skier. The story ends with Ludwig lying in his bath with a razor blade in each hand, prepared (and yet failing) to make a Roman end of it all.

He stretched out his hands, turned the right wrist inwards, held his breath and waited.

Waited for what?

A word of command.

From whom?

For the first time he realized that it must come from himself and no one else: he was absolutely alone with his own will.

An excellent situation. Unfortunately, Mr. Sansom has not led up to it with anything like the required manner. The self-indulgent self-pitying Ludwig with his romantic snobberies and old-world approach is not really a figure of comic pathos. Like Mr. Bates's Fitzgerald, he is just a middle-aged bore. What ought to have been diluted Turgenev has turned into something nasty that the authoress of *Elizabeth and her German Garden* saw in the woodshed.

I think the reason for this lies in Mr. Sansom's changed style. He is naturally a complicated, almost a tesselated writer, but he has been told so often and so authoritatively to cut out the trimmings that he has grown to believe an act of butchery to be the essential prelude to his getting on good terms with the common reader. All through the admirable descriptive passages in this story one can feel the bit between Mr. Sansom's teeth. Perhaps just one more paragraph, another three sentences—but no, the stylistic censor jerks him back to mundane magazine storytelling. His gifts lie in quite another direction and in hoisting the Somerset Maugham standard, he is flying under false colours.

Miss Lavin and Mr. Goldman go their different ways with accustomed and average success. The first, brooding on life with gentle Irish melancholy tells her stories, as it were, from before the peat fire. The blue smoke curls lazily up around her spinsters, widows, and young seminarists as, in a kind of sing-song half dialect, they keen their way through the tragedies of the long long ago. The effect, except when an occasional shower of sparks announces some flickering of unobtrusive violence, is pleasing but a trifle soporific. Mr. Goldman has never written better than in his first book, *East End My Cradle*, but in a story like *A Youthful Idyll* he can still achieve almost unbearable poignancy. When he deserts the first person he is apt to go to pieces and at least one of the stories in this volume is little more than wartime reportage.

Mr. Causley is a newcomer who goes to the top of his own class at once. Though a few of these stories are set in the West Country, most of them are concerned with wartime life in the Navy. They combine wit, tough vitality and a slangy independence of current literary conventions with a flair for the knockout ending. Some of them, such as *Mrs. Lisboa*, have a grisly Grand Guignol quality. O. Henry would not have disowned *Joney and the Whale* or *A Night at the Opera* while *A Night in Aleck* would have delighted Wilkie Collins. In his most ambitious story, Mr. Causley shows signs of outgrowing his comic P.O.s and Leading Stokers and achieving real characterisation. I hope that his great talents as a humorist will not deflect him from the path of writing proper.

JOHN RAYMOND

SHORTER REVIEWS

Paloma. By Mrs. ROBERT HENREY. *Dent.* 15*s.*

Everywhere there are the oddest private circles. Spiritualists meet over a grocer's shop, Stonehenge has its devotees on a particular morning, a house in Kensington is inhabited by bridge-players, and at another in Westminster gentlemen put on hats when they wish to speak: no less fascinating and strange is the "open-air drawing-room" of the Green Park revealed by the introductory pages of *Paloma*. Thither, in the fateful summer of 1944, come the women with knitting or a book, with dogs, with (we gather from Mrs. Robert Henrey) money and themselves—oh, themselves!—to talk about. They seem at first frankly idiotic: the writer's approach baffles by its seeming complicity. Such chatter, so serious a charm! Among the Anglo-French ladies who put their heads together under the trees an