

MOMENTS OF TRUTH

MARY LAVIN: *A Simple Lady*. And Other Stories. Michael Joseph. 10s. 6d.

The Cornhill: Supplement Number 7. H. E. BATES: *The Grass God*. WILLIAM SANSOM: *Episode at Gasteln*. John Murray. 2s. 6d.

The short story seems a natural medium for Irish writers. Their gift for the tone of conversation and their unstrained mastery of atmosphere give them a flying start over all competitors. Thus Miss Mary Lavin considering old ladies and their companions, a visit to a cemetery, the class distinctions of an Irish village or the possessiveness of motherhood seems always to be describing easily what happens before her eyes, though she never writes in the first person. This air of detachment, while being subtly in the know, is what gives her stories that special Irish quality of sympathetic ease. The best of them, such as "A Visit to the Cemetery," a true and touching revelation of the inaptness of youth for sorrow, and "The Sand Castle," a story of quarrelsome children finally united by their sense of a power—the sea—greater than themselves, amply confirm Miss Lavin's talent. "The Widow's Son," a story with two endings both rooted in the domineering character of a violent and aggressive mother, is another good example of her power to evoke a life's theme. Yet the grace of manner cannot altogether blind the reader to a fault of over-emphasis which is Miss Lavin's weakness when she abandons Irish village life. The selfish bachelor, for

instance, of "A Woman Friend" and the single lady of the title-story are presented with so much venom that they secure a sympathy which the author did not intend. This is the more to be regretted since the latter is nearly very good indeed. Without its last bitter sentence, an unnecessary summing-up, the loneliness of the arid spinster who has to watch her old father's belated surrender to lust would have been movingly established. Yet in spite of this occasional falling of taste, none of these stories is without its moment of truth.

Neither Mr. H. E. Bates nor Mr. William Sansom is at his best in the stories which compose the first fiction supplement of the *Cornhill*, though Mr. Sansom adds some of his own particular distinction to a commonplace theme. In "The Grass God" Mr. Bates, while delightfully evoking a hot, scented summer, does not succeed at all in giving life to his characters, who belong, indeed, to a different sort of magazine. The rich, selfish landowner who dallies all summer through with a delicious girl with beautiful legs only to discover that his arid heart has awoken too late cannot be taken seriously in spite of the symbolism of the dying grass. Mr. Sansom, on the other hand, does provide a convincing portrait of an elderly, *fin de siècle* Austrian with a perpetual nostalgia for the past. His abortive encounter with a young girl, bored but admiring, who is in search of a husband is an adequate restatement of the truism about youth and age, but it is not until the final scene in the bath when Ludwig characteristically fails to commit suicide that

Mr. Sansom really comes into his own.

MARY TREADGOLD: *The Running Child*. Cape. 12s. 6d.

Fortunately there are so few child-suicides that most people have never had anything to do with one. However, this makes it difficult to judge whether Miss Treadgold's story gives a true picture of such an abnormality. The resilience of children is astounding, and most adults could, if pressed, paint their own early years in lurid colours, only half realizing that a great deal of their life at that time was penny plain. Miss Treadgold's Emily is 12 years old and she is driven by the outgrowing of a friendship and the fear of emigrating to Canada with her family to return to the farm in Cornwall where she had spent the war years. During her three-day flight she is befriended by an army deserter, who has perfectly creditable but highly emotional reasons for wanting to go in the same direction, and, of course, the police are looking for both of them. When Emily finally gets to Cornwall the farm is no longer as she had imagined it, and by now she is so in the habit of running away that she jumps over the cliffs to her death.

This is a story which would have been better told shortly and with great simplicity. Miss Treadgold's observation is wide and detailed, but she never quite explains why Emily, out of all other confused children, should have acted like this, and the several sub-plots do not knit into a whole.