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PREFACE

THE stories I have selected for this volume were written between the years 1930 and 1940; they represent something like a quarter of my output in the short story form between the publication of my first volume of stories in 1928 and the outbreak of war. Both chronologically and in atmosphere, therefore, they might well appear, at first glance, to be confined to a limited period irretrievably lost to us: to a decade in which most of us were wandering in a desert, deluded by oases of peace which, well before the end of it, had completely disappeared.

'What is your world?' a young, earnest, and bewildered young poet asked me recently. 'I know the world of Lawrence, of Thomas Hardy, of Conrad, Joyce, and the rest of them. But what is your world? Where do you stand? What, in fact, do your stories mean?'

The reader of this volume may find, I think, some answers to these questions in the stories selected here. My world, he will discover, is made up of what appear to be, at a superficial glance, ordinary people; its atmosphere is largely that of the country, the village, and the provincial town; only rarely will he find me setting foot in the world of metropolitan man. Nor will he find in it much talk of war, of rumours of war, or of the upheavals of society that, in the thirties, made novels of proletarian bias so intellectually fashionable, and indeed popular, both in this country and America. Politics have no place in it; nor reformations for the social, religious, and moral state of man.

It is largely, he will discover, a world of the loved and the unloved, the bewildered, the not very articulate, the emotionally hungry who do not know why; of fundamental passions, of instinctive actions and their effects. It is not a highly dramatic world; its situations are often casual, almost always plotless, and largely uncontrived. Compared with the magazine story of pre-war days and even more with the magazine story which still, like a period piece, continues in suspended vogue in America today, the stories it reveals may possibly appear formless, with a tendency to stop short, leaving the reader in the air, or simply to fade away. A few will seem not much more than prose-pictures. In many of them the situations and the characters will remain unresolved in any absolute sense and frequently the characters

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will seem to walk out into separate and undefined existences, beyond the final page.

For these reasons the stories in this selection, though chronologically confined to a single decade of twenty years ago, belong as surely to the world of today as to the world of yesterday. The fundamental scale of emotional values does not, I think, change very much in twenty years, if at all, and the reader who finds himself diverted or interested by the stories here will find much the same world, peopled by much the same apparently unspectacular characters, in post-war volumes of mine such as *Colonel Julian*, *The Nature of Love*, and *The Daffodil Sky*. If he recognizes that these characters have certain affinities with himself, the people he knows, or the people he wonders about as he passes them in the street and the railway station I shall be the last to quarrel with him.

'A wise man,' it is said, 'takes men as they are. He does not expect to alter them much.'

My world is that of man. Its mainsprings are those of love, fear, avarice, jealousy, and most of the rest of the foolish and pleasant pains that flesh is heir to. I cannot change this world; all I can hope to do, as I have tried to do in these stories, is to turn on to it the microscope of my own particular eye, hoping that the result affords my readers some sort of diversion, even pleasure, as they read of their fellow creatures and their hopes, problems, and aspirations.