

Consequential Marriages

Textures of Life. By HORTENSE CALISHER. Secker & Warburg. 18s.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle. By SHIRLEY JACKSON. Joseph. 18s.

The Serpent. By JANE GASKELL. Hodder & Stoughton. 21s.

Best Stories of Phyllis Bottome. Chosen by DAPHNE DU MAURIER. Faber. 18s.

Seven by Five. By H. E. BATES. Joseph. 25s.

White Huntress. By SUSAN CHITTY. Methuen. 18s.

Hortense Calisher's second novel attempts, and pretty well pulls off, something of a *Golden Bowl*. This one could not be symbolised by the extravagant *objet d'art*, with its bizarre flaw, conceived by James. Miss Calisher's material is the American bourgeoisie at home, and the textures of the lives she interweaves are homely. Hers is a *Golden Bowl* in, so to speak, basketwork. But the working is Jamesian indeed in firmness of structure and subtlety of superstructure. Sometimes she uses the master's very idiom — not in pastiche but as legitimately and creatively as Tiepolo used Veronese's.

The story starts at the wedding of Elizabeth and David, a social event which thrusts together the bride's mother and the bridegroom's father. Not long after their children have done so, these two marry. This second pairing implies none of the moral ambiguity of Adam Verver's marriage to his son-in-law's mistress. But the unspoken Oedipus motif is just as strong, and so is the shock to the first couple. The novel consists of the effects of each marriage on the other; the implications each holds for the sympathetic relation between David and his father, and for the impatient, dissatisfied relation of Elizabeth and her mother; and the response of the characters, severally, in pairs, as parents or grandparents, to the younger couple's baby daughter, who sustains the Principino's role at the heart of the knot. James aerated the closeness of his four principals by allowing them a third couple as chorus or confidants; but, although Miss Calisher's people sometimes have to confide in acquaintances, their situation acknowledges that in modern urban society marriage is the only voluntary relationship that will bear weight, and the parent-child relationship the only involuntary one that cannot be dodged. Nothing remits the intensity with which each of these four needles, threaded with its own colour and ply, is compelled to stitch in and out of the others' stitching.

In such a quadrille, the performers need not, perhaps cannot, be equals, but they demand equal treatment from their author. In James's nexus the Prince is admittedly not up to the other three. Yet it is not simply as a weak character that he lets the dance down. Weak characters can be boldly portrayed; but James is too relenting towards the Prince to make him a Vronsky or a George Osborne; the weakness lies not only in the Prince but

in James — where it is perhaps a weakness for Italian young men, or just for princes. Miss Calisher's construction has a comparable flaw, and again in the younger generation. *Jeune premier* parts are always the hardest to do. Her David may not properly exist — there is little to him but a trick of letting his glasses slide down his nose — but he is waved into being by adroit sleight of hand. It is Elizabeth, reacting against her mother's 'taste', bohemianly disregarding material objects except such as she herself, as a sculptor, makes, in whom one suspects a lightness of character and a college-girl pretentiousness of intellect — which the author seems not to realise. With the older couple Miss Calisher can do nothing wrong. The vivid, invalid life of David's father, the vaguer but penetrating vision of Elizabeth's mother — she splendidly creates both and superbly counterpoises them. Miss Calisher is not only that rarity, a talented novelist, but that double-blossomed rarity, a talented novelist who is serious about art.

No *objet d'art*, Shirley Jackson's new novel is a macabre but un-nasty curio well worth acquiring. In rural America, tormented or ostracised by the villagers, two recluse sisters tend each other, the cat and their stray-witted uncle. He and they are the survivors of a poisoned dinner which, six years ago, when the younger girl was 12, took off the rest of the family. The elder, domesticated sister (in pointed fact, the cook) was tried and acquitted, but remains suspect. Now a cousin foists himself on the household, provoking a crisis which not only gets rid of cousin and uncle alike but brings the sisters to the point of mentioning between themselves what both know but never allude to — who really dunnit six years before. Materially devastated but happy to be on their own, the sisters are left to their highly inventive make-believes and their touching tenderness for each other.

In *The Serpent*, Jane Gaskell's imagination tackles and proves equal to no smaller a salvage job than re-floating Atlantis, the continent which (according to Plato, in punishment of its inhabitants' impiety) was engulfed at an impressive date during ancient times. Firmly, and with a proper disregard for the minutiae of probability (her ancient civilisation possesses porcelain and books with pages and knows about the extinction of the brontosaurus), Miss Gaskell creates the political situation of the time in Atlantis and South America. The story is told through the first person of Cija (pronounced, a foreword says, Key-a), a princess who believes herself a goddess. At the behest of her mother, who is Dictatress of the country, Cija has been brought up in a tower and ignorance of the fact that the male sex exists — until suddenly her mother orders her out of the tower and into the bed of the enemy general, whom Cija is expected first to seduce and then to assassinate. Miss Gaskell's world is a valid creation. She is a romantic, but with something of the crisp, realistic romanticism of Stendhal. She takes no gothic — or vandalistic — liberties with psychology. Cija authentically has the feelings of a young girl: the only pity, in this taking

and impressive book, is that she also uses the flat-heeled language of a teenager.

Of the two short-story-tellers now selected and collected, Phyllis Bottome was a sound turner, and H. E. Bates is a deft *écrivain*. The title of Mr Bates's volume, *Seven by Five*, implies merely that it contains 35 stories. The earliest, dating from 1926, is a pure Mansfield sketch of a put-upon waitress in a teashop; some of the later ones flow through the smooth persona almost of a Rattigan; in all of them the technique is of such delicate economy as to obscure that there is often precious little to be economical with, and that the stories, like the title, boil down to rather commonplace statements. Phyllis Bottome's older-fashioned methods supply more in the way of names, previous histories and locales (Maughamesque in variety). The worst story (lovers are reunited as ghosts) is sentimental, the best near-mordant (a French brothel-keeper's favourite protégée has grown mountainously fat). Most are marred by the blunt mythology of 'strong' situations and characterisation: moments after which nothing can ever be the same again, acts which kill off the old self and give birth to a new, eyes which — I'm not sure what they're meant to be, but it is more than you would reasonably expect, since one character is censured for having eyes which look 'as if they were merely organs of sight'.

In the Forties most novels began 'It was raining'. Now they usually begin 'I must tell you about myself'. Susan Chitty's does. The 'I', 18 and daughter of a poor lord, is sent on a husband-hunt to Africa. She describes the voyage and after with blinding, debby brightness. Her first night on board, a steward asks 'What is your pleasure?' Her narrative refers to him, for the rest of the voyage, as 'W.Y.P.' Into, frankly, the W.P.B.

BRIGID BROPHY

Emergent Wales

David Lloyd George. By KENNETH MORGAN. University of Wales Press. 5s.

Wales in British Politics. By KENNETH MORGAN. University of Wales Press. 30s.

The Mask of Merlin. By DONALD MCCORMICK. Macdonald. 42s.

One of the central problems of modern British history is to explain why the great Liberal government of 1906 failed to create an enduring progressive coalition, of the kind which Franklin Roosevelt created in the United States. Ten years earlier, it is true, there had been no reason to believe that the Liberals would be capable of doing any such thing. Keir Hardie's prediction that British Liberalism was bound to go the way of its Continental counterparts — leaving the party of labour in solitary opposition to the party of capital — seemed to be borne out by the collapse of the Rosebery administration in 1895 and the interminable wrangles which divided the Liberal Party around the turn of