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Fiction

By H. E. BATES

Portrait of the Artist's Children. By Edward Charles. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)

Anitra's Dance. By Fannie Hurst. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

Parable for Lovers. By Lewis Gibbs. (Dent. 7s. 6d.)

The Deacon. By Alun Llewellyn. (Bell. 7s. 6d.)

In everyday life artists and musicians—and for that matter writers—are generally hard-working, conscientious and penurious men, with wives and families to keep, coal-bills to pay and work to do, exactly like engineers and civil servants. The notion that poets are vague and shallow fellows, looking as though they need four or five hair-cuts, has been, like the idea of painters as unkempt figures dressed in bottle-green velvet trousers and a loose red silk bow, an unconscionable time-dying. Wasn't it Shaw who dealt it a severe blow by advising an aspiring artist first of all to go and get his hair cut? The eccentric musician, so absorbed in the passion of creation or execution that he never washes himself and has no time to eat anything but an underdone egg for days on end, has had a long run too. It would seem, however, as though these picturesque figures were not quite played out; and there is something a little ironical in the fact that it is the writers of a so-called realistic age who are doing most to perpetuate them.

Mr. Charles is the offender in respect of the irresponsible artist, and Miss Hurst in respect of the mad musician. Thomas, Mr. Charles's artist, is not quite on the same plane of improbability as Richard Bruno, Miss Hurst's pianist; and the *ménage à trois*, if you include the nurse, that Thomas keeps in his "rather poor studio in rather a poor street" in Chelsea is a little nearer life and possibility than the New York menagerie in which Richard Bruno, the musicians' musician, is trying to finish his *Span of Life Symphony*. But both derive from literature rather than life. The exact precedent for Thomas is elusive for the moment; but the precedent for the mad Bruno is all too clear and recent. The Brunos are the Sangers—not of the circus but of *The Constant Nymph*—Americanized.

Thomas and the *Portrait of the Artist's Children* in general are quite English. Thomas lives in the now hackneyed "poor studio in rather a poor street in Chelsea"—it used to be Paris—and lives in the hackneyed hand-to-mouth manner that is intended to be both sordid and picturesque, washing his paint-brushes in the frying-pan and using his palette, more or less, as the plate for his hastily fried egg. He is parted from his wife, who is a stock character torn from the pages of a fashionable fiction magazine, and is half-living with Maisie, his model. He is in general rather a likeable chap, with a propensity for giving away copies of the works of Katherine Mansfield, whose name Mr. Charles has consistently misspelt throughout the book. Maisie, besides sitting in the nude, does the cooking, and there is also a Cockney charwoman, whom Mr. Charles would appear to have modelled on a Vaudeville caricature, who does the cleaning. Thomas has a brother William, a prig, and most important of all, three children. It is these children whose portrait Thomas—not Mr. Charles—paints. This picture of the three children against a background of Anchusa-blue velvet, is Thomas's masterpiece. Mr. Charles's own intention is to give us, however, not so much a portrait of the artist's children as a portrait of the artist himself. Thomas's portrait is a great success; not so much can be said for the author's.

Mr. Charles begins by making Thomas rather a *cliché*, a common enough fault, and a forgivable one in novels, where the writer goes on to deepen and broaden his conception of the character. A greater writer would have deepened and broadened Thomas, using the portrait of the children as a symbol of his tragedy and frustration, making us feel and understand the suffering of a man whose only chance of possessing his children was to paint them on canvas. Mr. Charles has missed this opportunity, and Thomas remains more or less of a *cliché* to the end. The reason is that Mr. Charles is not a great writer, but a precious one. His attitude throughout the book is one of superiority. Whereas the great writer credits the reader with an intelligence equal to his own, the lesser writer delights in crediting him with less; the great writer keeps himself detached and unscen, never stepping between himself and his picture, but the lesser writer keeps

bobbing up, Sir Oracle-fashion, with what he considers are vital explanations or remarks of profound philosophical importance. Thus Mr. Charles, after a conversation between two servants such as never existed outside his novel or off the stage, caps their "good-looking, I calls im, and kind like," sort of conversation with the remark:

"So does variety in nervous condition account for diversity of what is called *opinion*."

This precious and portentous and wholly unnecessary remark will infuriate the critical reader who does not roar with laughter. Yet it is a common trick of Mr. Charles's, and is to my mind both ludicrous and illegitimate. One has only to imagine Mr. Charles as a playwright instead of a novelist, and to picture him rushing on the stage after the dialogue between the servants, crying: "So does variety, &c.," to realize fully how untenable and false his position is—and why, incidentally, his novel is a failure.

Miss Hurst is never guilty of this attitude of superiority, though she commits almost every crime in the novelistic calendar, as well as in the calendar of taste. *Anitra's Dance* is really a kind of marionette-show, and it would have been extremely amusing if treated not seriously, but satirically. The eccentric musician wrestling at the piano with his symphony and his plate of radishes would have been killing as a marionette: impassioned thought—radish—major chord—radish—arpeggio—another radish—hand on brow—still another radish—minor chord—and then the last despairing mixture of radish and *rallentando*. Anitra herself, with her genius for imitating everyone from Chaplin to Sarah Bernhardt, would have fitted into the marionette scheme admirably, too, along with the rest of the mad Bruno household. What would be more difficult to convey by marionette means is the effect of Miss Hurst's style, which must be the most incredible English written on either side of the Atlantic. The first five or six pages of *Anitra's Dance* are to me not only unreadable, but quite incomprehensible. It is as though Miss Hurst, realizing the importance of creating her mad atmosphere as early as possible, saw a good opportunity, hers being a musical novel, to show herself off as a Schönburg of literature. Later she settles down to a more tolerable verbosity:

"Lil' orphan Waxman's come to our house to stay—and stay—and stay, to watch the scales and grace notes and turn the Bruno grey and stay and stay and stay and stay."

"Small-boned, the hand of a woman, the eye of a gimlet turning, the manner overlaid with Napoleonic silkiness that had survived a quarter century furious struggle in the American master of men, the little magnate looked dapper enough to be the son of the man you would imagine him to be."

It is only right to warn the reader who finds this sort of thing amusing that there are something over four hundred pages of it.

Mr. Lewis Gibbs's novel by contrast is very short, quiet in tone, and deliberately—and not unintentionally—in the realm of the fantastic. *A Parable for Lovers* concerns an English middle-class youth's adventures with a wood-nymph near Athens and unites something of the atmosphere of the traditional Greek myth with the atmosphere of today. It needed to be treated delicately and idyllically, but with humour, in order to be convincing. Possessing the necessary gifts, Mr. Gibbs has made a delicate, rather insubstantial thing of it—a book with something of the fragility of an anemone and something of its ephemerality.

The Deacon is a work of honest, sober realism. There is nothing fantastic, portentous, superior or vulgar about the Welsh Valley in which its scenes are laid, or about Mr. Llewellyn's attitude towards its people. The style, a little stiff and constricted, is appropriate to the story of the Deacon, Idwal Probert, and to the atmosphere of crudity and narrowness and religious fervour in which he is the central figure and through which he moves to his tragic end. The tragedy is a common one: that of a man so self-centred, self-worshipping, that he alienates his family and friends by his desire for power. It is a tragedy of pride, and though it is as common in literature as Miss Hurst's mad musician, it is also even more common in life. And therein lies the fundamental difference between the two books.