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Fiction

By H. E. BATES

Thank You, Jeeves. By P. G. Wodehouse. (Herbert Jenkins. 7s. 6d.)

Rude Society. By H. P. McGraw. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)

The Road to Wildcat. By Eleanor Risley. (Constable. 7s. 6d.)

Bumphrey's. By R. H. Mottram. (Murray. 7s. 6d.)

Men are Unwise. By Ethel Mannin. (Jarrolds. 7s. 6d.)

The Tales of D. H. Lawrence. (Secker. 8s. 6d.)

THERE used to be, and no doubt still is, a periodical, an illustrated comic, called *Chips* (Tchekov I believe contributed to a paper of the same name in Russia), the leading lights of which were two tramps, one very fat and the other very lean, named Weary Willie and Tired Tim. These gentlemen, the forerunners of Laurel and Hardy, were engaged each week, year in, year out, for innumerable years, in a series of adventures in which steak-and-kidney pies, the police, yard-dogs, buxom cooks, swag and impossible dreams of affluence played a large part. Willie, the exact counterpart of Oliver Hardy, was the gentleman of the piece, and Tim, like Laurel, the scallywag who tripped over the coal-scuttle just as they were lifting the silver from Lord Nob's. The curious thing is that these characters never grew old and never changed. Their adventures never departed from a fixed formula, and their humour, based on the classic principle of contrast, never seemed to grow stale. Their adventures were related in an extremely flowery style that was a mixture of colloquialisms and Johnsonese, and they themselves, dressed in rags and tatters, talked in the "Haw-haw!" style of the titled ass in stage farce. They were justly famous.

The formula used by the creators of Weary Willie and Tired Tim is the formula used by Mr. Wodehouse in the stories about Bertram Wooster and his butler. It is a formula as old as farce itself. Laurel and Hardy, Moran and Mack, Weary Willie and Tired Tim, Wooster and Jeeves are all productions of it, and their creators are all slaves to the unchangeable principle of contrast. It is because Wooster and Jeeves are so sharply contrasted in all that they do, think or say that we laugh at them so spontaneously. Wooster has only to talk like a fatuous ass and Jeeves has only to answer him in the impeccable voice of a Lord Chamberlain announcing a reigning monarch and there is instantaneous combustion. It is all as easy as striking flint on tinder. And Mr. Wodehouse is now such an old hand at the game that in *Thank You, Jeeves*, the first novel in which Jeeves and Wooster have appeared together, it comes off perfectly. In short, the book is extremely entertaining and is much to be recommended to those who, remembering Weary Willie and Tired Tim, desire to recapture the old idiotic rapture without the indignity of being seen engrossed in a comic.

Rude Society is even more entertaining than Mr. Wodehouse and in many ways more satisfactory. From its title it would seem to be concerned with Mayfair, sherry-parties and casual seductions. In reality the scene is an electrical engineering works, and the characters, almost without exception, are workers—ostensible workers—employed there. The book, as the publishers carefully point out, is not a "rude book" at all, though seductions are plentiful and the beer consumed by the electrical estimators throughout the book would float a cruiser.

Fifty years ago Mr. McGraw's novel would have been called not *Rude Society* but *Little Peter: or The Path that Leadeth to Destruction*, for Peter Winslow's adventures among the boozing electrical estimators and the loose office girls are almost identical with the adventures through which pious young Victorian heroes were made to pass in order that they might realize the Folly of Intemperance and how readily the Devil Found Work For Idle Hands. In those days, the story, written without the faintest touch of humour by a hack with a juicy pen in one hand and a handkerchief in the other, would have had a Moral Purpose. From the first glass of beer to the final scene where the young hero tossed in the fivers of dissipation, crying for his mother, there would have been no escape from it. We should have been exhorted to remember Little Peter whenever the Small Voice of Temptation whispered to us and we should have laid the book down with the miserable feeling that we ourselves were potential Little Peters

and that, but for the Grace of God, we might also have been treading the downward path.

How different it all is, now, in the hands of Mr. McGraw. Here is the same story, but the effect is no longer oppressive and discomforting, but witty and stimulating. The book, as the publishers point out, is utterly un sentimental, and when Peter raises the first glass of India Pale Ale to his lips we have no desire to cry out and warn him that he is being Tempted by the Devil (The ironical capitals are borrowed from Mr. McGraw himself). Similarly we feel no righteous hatred for Mr. Boyd and Mr. Hammond, the two estimators who booze so colossally, do no work, and take turns in seducing the office girls. These figures, like Peter himself, are drawn with detachment and humour. We are not asked to believe that they are good or bad. The dice is not loaded either for or against them.

The result is that *Rude Society* is not only very amusing but quite convincing. The electrical works, the particular office in which Peter and Mr. Hammond and Mr. Boyd work, the public-houses and the dance-halls where the boozing is done, and not least the characters themselves are all sketched in with deftness and veracity. The occasional light extravagance of the style would also do credit to Mr. Wodehouse:

"This is where I live," said Miss Bantripp, stopping suddenly and facing him.

"Oh," said Peter, alarmed at the necessity of deciding so quickly on a course of action. "Well—er—"

"It's been ever so nice," she said, in the accepted phrase. "I enjoyed it ever so."

"Oh, that's fine," said Peter. "Perhaps you'll let me take you again, some time?"

"May be," said Miss Bantripp. She put one hand on the gate. By a species of miracle Peter was now inspired with the correct formula:

"Well, aren't you going to kiss me good night, Tango?"

"If you like," said Miss Bantripp without any hesitation. She took her hand from the gate, but made no further move. It was left to Peter to take the initiative, and he did so.

In this sort of thing Miss Bantripp was an artist, and the effect of that artistry upon Peter was in many respects the equivalent of a hard punch over the heart."

It seems likely that much of the book, if not all of it, is closely based upon Mr. McGraw's own experiences. Similarly with *The Road to Wildcat*, by a new American writer, though here there is some doubt as to whether the book is to be taken as a novel or as an autobiography. The book is written in the first person and is sub-titled "A Tale of Southern Mountaineering," and there seems no reason to believe that Miss Risley is not the woman who, with her husband and dog, pushes a sort of Chinese wheelbarrow across Alabama and Georgia in search of new health and adventures. This being so the book can hardly be judged as fiction, though the mountain characters, speaking in that crude but beautiful idiom so perfectly recorded by Miss Elizabeth Madox Roberts, are stranger and more romantic and nearer to being fictitious than any of the workers in Mr. McGraw's electrical factory.

Miss Mannin and Mr. Mottram seem to have come to a point when, as writers they must do or die. To judge from *Men Are Unwise* and *Bumphrey's* they would seem to be doing very little. Mr. Mottram, never an imaginative writer, and at his best as an honest and sober observer of the lives of provincials and soldiers, has attempted in *Bumphrey's* to present us with a fresh aspect of the eternal problem of parents and children. The subject seems utterly unsuited to his talent, and he flounders from the very first, his manner blundering and heavy, the spiritual and more delicate aspects of the question eluding him completely. Miss Mannin is what is known as an accomplished writer: which means that her work is a little slick, a little false, but never bad enough to be outrageous.

What a relief to turn from Miss Mannin and Mr. Mottram and even the rest of these writers to Lawrence. His passion, his almost crude power, his delicacy, his love of colour and flowers, his genius for bringing a thing or a character or a scene to life almost before he had written a line about it—all this can be seen as well in his stories, if not better, than in his novels. There are nearly fifty stories here, at an absurd price, and one's only regret is that *Love Among the Haystacks* and its companion stories, some of the earliest and loveliest things he ever wrote, could not have been included too.