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Fiction

By H. E. BATES

Out of Life. By Myron Brinig. (Cobden Sanderson. 7s. 6d.)
Crack of Doom. By Hugh Edwards. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
The Padre of St. Jacob's. By Stephen Graham. (Nicholson and Watson. 7s. 6d.)
Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself. By Radclyffe Hall. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
To be a King. By Hester W. Chapman. (Gollancz. 8s. 6d.)

THREE of the novels on this list deal with life in strange countries, and the authors of them begin with the strong advantage of writing about what we might call the picturesque unknown, Mr. Brinig about America, Mr. Edwards about Jamaica, and Miss Chapman about the Europe of another century. Miss Radclyffe Hall and Mr. Graham deal with a life that will be familiar to most of us, and they start under the handicap of writing about the commonplace. Miss Hall labours also under the further handicap of being a novelist trying her hand at the short story.

The life with which Mr. Brinig deals is the least strange, and the section he has chosen from it is also the briefest. Whereas Mr. Edwards deals in centuries Mr. Brinig has chosen a single day out of the life of one man for his entire subject. Sam Biggott is the owner of a New York delicatessen store, a man of forty, with a wife of thirty-eight but no children. Every day he goes to the store, opens it, sells his goods, shuts up, returns to his wife and eats a fried steak for supper. The steak, slightly burned, eaten night after night without change or complaint, symbolizes the monotony of Sam's existence. But the day which Mr. Brinig has chosen out of that existence is different; he has purposely described it as out of life. For Sam's wife announces that she is going to have a baby. The effect on Sam is instantly revolutionary, the change in him miraculous and dynamic. From a commonplace delicatessen store-owner he is changed into a sort of god, drunk with the wine of prospective parenthood. He is not merely going to become a father—he is the only man in New York, possibly in the whole United States, very likely in the whole world, who is going to become a father. There is something extremely touching in the way Mr. Brinig has conveyed all this—Sam's ecstacy and wonder, his changed attitude to his fellow men, his sudden realization of the sufferings of motherhood, his absurd, godlike exultation whenever he thinks of the coming child, his swaggering and pathetic confidence in himself, his ultimate frustration and tragedy. The whole of a life's sufferings, delights, hopes and disappointments are in fact crowded into the twenty-four hours Mr. Brinig describes. Sam is universal; his experiences are as common but as everlastingly wonderful as birth itself. But he is also extremely individual, a living character. Mr. Brinig has portrayed him with a detached sympathy and a kind of tender humour that reminds one, very faintly, of Sherwood Anderson at his best. It is all very convincing and memorable. *Out of Life*, in fact, could not have a more singularly appropriate title.

Crack of Doom is, like *Out of Life*, a short novel, but dealing not with a day out of life, but with three centuries. It is divided into three sections, in reality three long-short stories, which are joined together by a common episode, the frustration by earthquake of an essay in seduction. The scene is Jamaica. Section one, dealing with the old slave-owning days, is rich, hot and bloody, the characters moving and speaking with a sort of belching licentiousness and boastful swaggering which, I take it, are appropriate characteristics for the descendants of English buccaneers. The whole of this first section has a sort of exotic liveliness, not to be confused with life, which is interesting without ever being moving or convincing. The colour, splashed on with a kind of buccaneering flourish, is extremely brilliant and the reader is dazzled into interest. In sections two and three, however, the repetition of the story becomes artificial, the colour drab, and the liveliness of the characters mechanical. Section one survives through the virtue of its unexpected and catastrophic climax, which is well done. The other two parts, being mere repetitions of it, lack that virtue and have no other to set in its place.

Mr. Stephen Graham, like Mr. Brinig, tells a very old and simple story in *The Padre of St. Jacob's*, taking for his hero—ironical word!—the shrewd, but foolish, godly but humbugging parson of a fashionable London church. The Reverend

Mark Whyte is, indeed, a worthy addition to the line of fictitious parsonic humbugs headed by Theobald Pontifex, and Mr. Graham has taken good care, as Butler did, to set him down in solid and commonplace surroundings and to relate his story in the plainest and most unpretentious kind of style. Like Mr. Somerset Maugham he has evidently learnt from Butler the shrewd trick of understatement, and he has kept up throughout the book a tone of irony so quiet that the undiscerning reader may very well miss it and end up by regarding the Reverend Mark Whyte as a poor misguided prelate and a victim of his own benevolence and the world's dishonesty. But the real tone of the book is set in the first paragraph and there should be no mistaking it:

"It was a brilliant Sunday morning and London without business looked like a man without boots, walking with holes in his socks, unkempt but careless, for the day was the one in the week which did not matter. . . . The corners of the by-streets were plastered with the Sunday newspapers, displaying the contrasting interests of customers: Wickham Steed on the New Austria in the *Sunday Times*, 'Another Woman Undone' in the *News of the World*, the effect of the latter poster was multiplied by the fact that the placards were duplicated, and at the corner of Southampton Street there were six women undone."

Nor are they the only women to be undone in the course of the book. The Reverend Mark Whyte, slender and dapper, is in due course also undone. He is a man of sixty-five, a lover of good food and wine, with a small fortune tied up in brewery shares; St. Jacob's is very fashionable and much frequented by unsatisfied ladies who also have fortunes and who love their dear padre second only to God Himself. The Padre is in turn only a little less attracted by the ladies than by the Almighty. He is nevertheless extremely earnest in his desire "to keep the cross on the Gold Standard," and is untiring in his attempt to advertise Christ. He plans a grand revival, soliciting the aid of the ladies and the Press. The whole thing is going to be a grand recruiting campaign for the army of Christ. The Padre is fond of going among all sorts and conditions of men, asking, have they found Jesus? and in that way he comes across a gentleman named Lloyd, an American, who so far from having found Christ has lost a colossal fortune and is living in sin into the bargain. The Padre, weak, self-indulgent, gullible, falls for the old, old confidence trick and loses his fortune. Lloyd is a most engaging character; for he not only gulls the Padre but turns the head of his most fervent church-worker, and another woman is undone. The Padre, with his easy platitudes, his fruity familiarity, his shallow philosophies, seems to me completely despicable. It is curious that one never feels in the least degree sorry for this ageing prelate who loses his fortune (and is reimbursed by the good ladies of the congregation)—a great tribute, I suggest, to Mr. Graham's powers of delicate and sustained irony. The satire is never cheap, never forced, and the fun of the thing never overworked. It might all have deviated into sniggering vulgarity, whereas the taste of it is admirably dry, delicious and refreshing. In short, *The Padre of St. Jacob's* is rather like a bottle of literary sherry.

To be a King, on the other hand, is very small beer. Everything has been done in the way of elaborate prefaces and editor's notes to persuade the reader that he is about to open a large bottle of ripe and authentic vintage. In reality the contents are flat and innocuous. Miss Radclyffe Hall's short stories are also disappointing. She possesses considerable talent and much courage, but she would seem to be essentially a novelist, ill at ease with a shorter and more exacting form.

The stories seem to sprawl loosely over the pages and her style is in places singularly careless and drab. Of the five stories *Fraülein Schwartz* seems to me the most successful. "Fraülein Schwartz was little and round and fifty, with neat greying hair and a very high bosom," and had lived for some years in Raymond's Private Hotel in Pimlico. She is a patriotic, sentimental creature who, though loved by everyone, devotes all her own love to a starving kitten. The story is a study in loneliness; but it also criticizes society, and there is something extremely ironical about the fact that the Fraülein, surrounded by so-called friends, should find solace in the kitten she picks up on the doorstep.