

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright © Evensford Productions Limited, 1934.

Fiction

By H. E. BATES

Mellory's Yard. By Cecilia Willoughby. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
The Captain Hates the Sea. By Wallace Smith. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
The Unexpected Guest. By Bernadette Murphy. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

HERE are two English novels and one American, each belonging to a very different category from the other two. They are all three surprising and interesting works: interesting because they are written seriously and observantly and because they derive from life and are not cheap imitations of the works of controversial or smart contemporary writers; and surprising because the general effect in each case is almost the exact opposite of the effect one might expect. Thus Miss Willoughby's novel, which has a great many of the ingredients of sentimental romance, from the seductive villain down to the angelic daughter beaten by the drunken father, is neither romantic nor sentimental in its ultimate effect; and Mr. Smith's book, which taken line by line is as cynical and hard-boiled a composition as ever came out of America, is in its final effect far more romantic than Miss Willoughby's earnestly written story of romance coming to the middle-aged circus proprietor. Lastly, Miss Murphy's novel, which starts by being smart and sophisticated, ends up by being a sort of period fairy tale.

Miss Willoughby's book is interesting also for another reason. It excites speculation. Judged by *Mellory's Yard*, Miss Willoughby seems to stand a strong chance of becoming the Mary Webb of the North Riding of Yorkshire, or if not the Mary Webb, at least the Sheila Kaye Smith. But there are at the same time many things in her novel which suggest that she may become a far more solid and satisfying writer than either of these ladies. At present she is inclined to mawkishness, but she possesses a Yorkshire sense of humour which may save her from falling into the ranks of the popular prose-poetesses with large circulations. The ultimately dry, rather crude, homespun effect of her novel seems to confirm this. Exactly how this effect is created I am not quite certain, but I am inclined to think it is not of conscious means. For Miss Willoughby's style is in general rather flabby and meandering, full of maladroit expressions which curdle the critical blood. She has not yet practised the art of self-denial, the art which will allow her to be satisfied with saying, "Mrs. Belmont was very fat" instead of "Mrs. Belmont was well upholstered in adipose tissue," which is what she appears to be satisfied with saying now.

Not that her novel—except in its conversations—is excessively verbose, or in fact excessively long. It is simply a tree that has not been pruned; the critical pruning-knife would have snipped off the dead phrases and useless words and the long-drawn-out conversations sucking away the root-strength of the book. There would have been no need to interfere with the main branches of the narrative, which concerns the history of a circus proprietor named Cameron, bankrupt and a bachelor when the book opens, romantically married in spite of the villain when it ends. Cameron is an excellent portrait, tenderly but strongly drawn. We meet him first at the bankrupt sale of his circus effects—his elephants, his lions, his beautiful ponies and his "big top." It is an excellent beginning for a novel, the moment of crisis in the life of its principal character, for Cameron's problem of finding a new life to live becomes our problem also, and incidentally our attraction. We follow him therefore very readily to the farm in the dales, where we meet the villain who combines sheep-stealing with woman-stealing, and from the dales to Mellory's Yard, where he lives in a miserable house next to what in Real Romance is called The Girl, who in turn has a drunken father who beats her and a lodger who is none other than the Villain himself. All this contrivance of coincidence, really Hardy at his worst, ought to be ludicrous and unstable, but for some reason it is both reasonable and solid. The Mellory's Yard scenes are, like the farm scenes, rich in small portraiture, and Cameron is consistently convincing. The failures in portraiture are among the major characters; the villain seduces too readily and turns up at the right moment too often, and

has a wife in the background too conveniently, just as the girl, Lily, weeps too spontaneously and is altogether too alluringly pathetic. These portraits lack individuality and depth, and in her readiness to tolerate them lie Miss Willoughby's dangers as a novelist. Her strength lies at present in her ability to create and sustain atmosphere. The dales scenes and the yard scenes, in spite of all her trespasses of style, are extremely convincing, and they prove her to be not only a novelist of observation and feeling but one of some potentiality.

Not a single one of Miss Willoughby's major faults are present in *The Captain Hates the Sea*. Sentimentality, laboured coincidence, verbal inflations, ready-made villainy, alluring pathos—Mr. Wallace Smith has learnt or has been taught to scorn these things. He is so competent and assured that he might very well have begun to learn the craft of writing novels in his kindergarten—and being an American probably did. Everything in his novel goes as he wants it to go; the mechanism is sealed and perfect. However astonishing and unexpected the behaviour of the passengers of the 'San Capador' may be to us, it is fairly certain that it has no surprises for Mr. Wallace Smith, who has surely worked it all out beforehand with a literary blue-print. If there is anything unpremeditated about the book at all it is the humour, which flashes up from the pages with a brilliance and unexpectedness that may even have surprised the composed author himself.

The voyage of the 'San Capador' is altogether very entertaining. The seaworthiness of the ship remains a mystery; for the weight of liquor carried aboard would surely have been enough to sink her before she reached the open sea. No doubt Mr. Wallace Smith is merely conforming to the prevailing convention that decrees that a novel in America is not a novel unless four-fifths or more of its characters are drunk, or are about to be drunk or have just been drunk at any one time. Novelists will soon have no need to state these facts, and readers will take them for granted. It is, however, interesting to note them here; for although Mr. Wallace Smith's characters are almost constantly in the bar they behave with extreme sobriety, wittiness and rationality. The book might have been called *Design for Drinking*.

It is certainly a novel with a clearly premeditated design. The characters are the passengers of the ship, and the design of the novel is such that although we meet them all, with one exception, on board the ship and never before or afterwards, we are shown a good deal of their lives in the past and the future. Moreover, during the voyage, they undergo a kind of sea-change; and the cause of that change, which involves also their growth from mere stock literary figures into living people, is the arrival on board of a prostitute whose name is never mentioned, whose lurid entrances and participations in the male drinking bouts are the subject of Grundy conferences and female jealousy, and who finally jumps overboard. Her personality affects the whole ship, from the captain down through the Grundyites, the detective, the major, the criminals, the cynical drinkers and the matrimonial squabblers to the abstemious bar-tender whose stock phrase is "Some other time." Her arrival is just a cheap sensation; her death is a tragedy universal in its effects. It raises the book in fact from a cheap book to one of subtlety and distinction. If its final effect is not one of tragedy or of cynicism but rather of romance, this too can be traced back to the Blue Ticket girl who leaps overboard. For Mr. Wallace is careful never to let us see the ship's passengers through her eyes, but only her through theirs. Thus, in spite of her effects, she remains impersonal and in a sense romantic.

An Unexpected Guest is also subtle and distinctive. It is a novel written not to a design but to a device—the device of going back in Time. The heroine, at the party with which the book opens, drinks from a glass of wine and finds herself back in Victorian times. The contrast between the old life and the new is amusing, and the book as a whole, in spite of the nervous and sparse style, is a charming piece of work, brief and delicate.