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THE TWO THIEVES, by T. F. Powys.
Chatto & Windus. 7s. 6d.

**DON JUAN AND THE WHEEL-
BARROW**, by L. A. G. Strong.
Gollancz. 7s. 6d.

OF modern writers few have been so misinterpreted as Mr. Powys, or so lavishly—and often indiscriminately—praised as Mr. Strong. Mr. Powys's method, unique not only in contemporary literature but in the whole history of the English novel, is a difficult art to accept, but there can be no possible acceptance of it as long as it is regarded as realistic; nor is its meaning likely to become clearer if we regard it as pure fantasy. It is an essentially subtle art, a fine mixture of symbolism and naturalism, allegory and mysticism. At their best, Powys's stories are parables—one would not be surprised to learn that he had modelled them all on that gem among stories *The Prodigal Son*—stories of earthly people with a heavenly meaning, told in the simplest language, with masterly economy and with perfect evolution. Mr. Powys does not break fresh ground; from *The Left Leg* to the three stories in *The Two Thieves* he has continually been cultivating the same field, ploughing it deeper and deeper as he becomes a more mature craftsman. His field is small and it is safe to predict that he will never plough another. Even his characters, book by book, remain the same—and these also he will never change. His most important characters are God and Love, and his minor characters, though passing under the names of Mr. Jar, the Rev. Hayball, Thomas Gidden and so on, are really Avarice, Jealousy, Lust, Covetousness, Beauty, Desire. Thus his characters are not characters at all, but qualities. He is the John Bunyan of our time—though a Bunyan with disturbing gifts of irony—his characters, like Bunyan's,

simply representing earthly vices and virtues. Their very speech, stilted and unnatural in its biblical precision, is not the speech of men and women of this world, but the speech of figures in poetic allegory. In a Powys story, a man will be the mouthpiece for greed, a woman for desire; they have rarely any of the finer shades of character.

It is scarcely necessary to review a new book by Powys, since every fresh book of his is simply some fresh presentation of an old formula. One now expects nothing new from Powys—there can be only something more inferior or more masterly. The essentials and fundamentals of his work remain the same. Of the three stories in *The Two Thieves* we can say simply that they are true Powys and leave it at that.

Unlike Powys, Mr. Strong is still an

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immature writer, an experimentalist who may at any time hit upon a great formula. *The Brothers* revealed him at his most powerful; the stories in *Don Juan and the Wheelbarrow* show him at his weakest. Strong began his career as a poet, but in this latest volume there is scarcely a line, and only one story, *The Rook*, in which the touch of the poet may be seen or felt. There is a facile devil in Mr. Strong and here, for the time, it has mastered him. One might turn to any page of *The Two Thieves* without knowing its author, and declare it instantly to be Powys; but one might turn over every single page of *Don Juan and the Wheelbarrow* without detecting the hand of Strong. His stories here might be by anyone. There is scarcely one which might not have been better done—and better done moreover by Strong himself. One is aware continually of all kinds of commonplace phrases, trite situations, popular magazine conversations, shallow psychology and facile thought. There is, in *The Big Man*, a paragraph which it is possible that even Miss Dell would have hesitated to write.

"It was over. But he had spoken to her. Hallelujah. He had spoken to her. Oh, oh, oh. He had spoken to her. Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace. The deep thick note of his voice would sound in her heart for ever."

Where, when he wrote this, and more important when he revised it, was Strong's sense of economy, his sense of balance, and above all his sense of humour and the ridiculous? There follow also other cheap and trite phrases such as "a swift hunger for expression," "affirm the link which bound them" — clumsy, ineffectual, superfluous phrases which the short-story writer cannot, and must not tolerate.

There is much in this volume to arouse the suspicion that many of these stories are early work. One hopes that it is so, for the sake of Strong's reputation and the future development of his art.

H. E. BATES.

BUTLER'S GIFT, by Martin Hare. Heinemann. 7s. 6d.

THE LADIES' ROAD, by Pamela Hinkson. Gollancz. 7s. 6d.

THE INVISIBLE ARMY, by Desmond Ryan. Barker. 8s. 6d.

Post hoc is not necessarily *propter hoc*, but, whatever may be the political and economic results of Mr. de Valera's advent to power, it is remarkable what an increase there has been this year in the popularity of Ireland in general and the rebellion in particular as subjects for fiction. A few months ago I reviewed three Irish books in these columns. And now here are three more books, all — though in very different ways — dealing with life in Ireland.

Martin Hare writes with subtle humour and a rare understanding. *Butler's Gift* is the best Irish book I have read since *Without My Cloak* — though it is the story of a very different kind of family and is told in a manner which is totally dissimilar from Miss O'Brien's. The Pallisers consisted of an impoverished rector and his wife, loyalists and Church of Ireland to the marrow, their three daughters, united only in antagonism to their parents, and Dee, the son of the house, enabled by a legacy to do no work and be a Republican. Into such a household came Philip Silver, a Liverpool bank-clerk and a distant connection, in hopes of learning the manners and modes of the Irish gentry, into whose