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SHORT STORIES

DUNKY FITLOW, by A. E. Coppard.
Cape. 7s. 6d.

AMONG contemporary writers of the short story there are few whose work has been so consistently exciting and disappointing as that of Mr. A. E. Coppard. He began to publish his originally coloured and rather elaborately joined stories when the short story in England was suffering very badly from magazinitis, introducing us to a strange variety of people—fishmongers, farmers, tailors, sextons, sailors, publicans, old ladies, and so on, to whom he gave the oddest names he could find or invent. Here and there he built a totally different kind of structure, as fantastic and crooked as a house in a Rackham drawing, peopling it with appropriately crooked man and crooked wife. He had two distinct methods: on the one hand a strong, deliberate style in which the humour and the images seemed a natural and inevitable part of the whole; on the other a fantastic, slapdash, colloquial style in which the images seemed false and the humour as heavy-handed as a cheap pun. At times the two styles became slightly intermixed, but not often disastrously. He was influenced by Chekhov, but the influence was subtly assimilated; he was even more influenced by Henry

James, and the influence was so painfully obvious that at times he might have been merely parodying James. But generally his own inspiration was so strong and rich that one forgot both James and Tchekhov. At the time of the publication of *The Field of Mustard* he was the greatest living English—not Irish—exponent of the short story. He has done as much as any man also towards nursing the short story from its long bout of magazinitis to its present state of health.

In *Dunky Fitlow* he has given us fifteen stories, though the publisher's wrapper says fourteen. Except for an odd story, they might all be called the bastard children resulting from the marriage of his two styles, and they have inherited all the vices and scarcely any the virtues of their parents. One searches in vain in *Dunky Fitlow* for anything with the quality of *The Field of Mustard* or *The Presser* or *Polly Morgan*, three of his finer tales; indeed, it seems scarcely credible that the man who wrote them could also have wasted seventeen pages in telling us *The Foggy Foggy Due*, a story even more feeble and absurd than its title. The one exception to these remarks is a story called *Doe*, a story told in Mr. Coppard's most unelaborate and compelling style, where one exalts at the sight, as Sherwood Anderson once said, of a master drawing his line with unhesitating skill. *Doe* is a moving story, most tender and right in its touch, in every way worthy of Mr. Coppard. Ironically, it is the fifteenth story in the book—as though it were too fine to be counted with the banal fourteen. Nevertheless, one is glad to see it there, for it renews one's hopes in Mr. Coppard's future work.

H. E. BATES.

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