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## MALACHI WHITAKER'S STORIES.

IT is not often that a writer comes before the world fully equipped, though in America Stephen Crane did so as a mere youth and Sherwood Anderson as a man in middle-age. It is interesting to note that both men were essentially short-story writers and that the influence of one of them is markedly evident in the work of Mrs. Malachi Whitaker, whose first stories revealed her also as a mature artist. It is perhaps this sure maturity in her first work that prevents one seeing any development in her third book, "Five for Silver" (Cape, 7s. 6d.). Indeed, the quality of her work scarcely varies from one book to another; one might jumble up all the stories she has ever published, and fail to distinguish the first-written from the last. As she began, she continues—a mature artist.

It would be easy to miss this accent of maturity in her work, for her art appears to be casual, like that of Sherwood Anderson, and simple to a point of *naïveté*. She has no stage effects, no stirring dramas, no tragic *dénouements*, no slick and unexpected endings; her stories work themselves out and trail off, leaving an unfinished air about them, a sense of life going on after the last word. The people she describes are also simple and casual; they are everyday folk, working out their lives happily or unhappily, a little bewildered and nearly always mute, unable to express either their unhappiness or their joy. It is significant that she writes again and again of those who cannot express themselves; she is the mouthpiece of the very young, of adolescent girls experiencing for the first time a love that they cannot understand and can hardly bear, of old men, as in the lovely story, "Spring Day at Slater's End," of woman troubled by children and the thought of unborn children, of confused middle-aged men whom life seems to have defeated. The method by which she describes these people is masterly; her stories are simple yet full of subtlety and fine suggestion, tender but ironical, pitying but free of all sentimentality; they are all short, as though the bleak winds of the north country, which she so often describes, had dwarfed them. Indeed, they are like those little hard knotty trees of the moors, small but deep-rooted, twisted but tough, which are not less lovely because they blossom late and briefly.

The pieces in "Afternoons in Utopia," by Stephen Leacock (John Lane, 7s. 6d.), are of very different stuff, but also are the products of a master-hand. The Utopia is the world of four or five hundred years from now, and by giving us glimpses of it Mr. Leacock satirizes the world of to-day, and his satire is not less bitter and sharp for being light. Doctors, modern universities, communism, and war—war very particularly—are mercilessly lashed, and the result is something not only salutary but very amusing.

The effect of "My Funniest Story" (Faber and Faber, 7s. 6d.), by various popular authors, is exactly the effect produced by the man who begins to roar with laughter and insists on one's listening to his funniest story: one can't raise a laugh. There is more fun in a page of Mr. Leacock than in the whole five hundred of this book.

H. E. BATES.

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