

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1939.

NEW NOVELS TO READ

A SMALL MASTERPIECE

Reviews by H. E. BATES

THE English public, which finds great difficulty in devoting more than half an eye to the short story, shows an even greater tendency to go to sleep when confronted by the novelette, or *conte*. Aware of this, certain shrewd novelists, among them Mr. David Garnett, realized that the only way of publishing a *conte* with success was to call it a novel, publish it as a novel and charge for it the same price as a novel. In this matter the publishers of **Mr. Chambers and Persephone**, by **Mr. Christopher Whitfield** (Golden Cockerel Press, 8s. 6d.), have made a great mistake; they have charged the price of a novel and have called the book a tale. This, I am afraid, reduces its potential public to a small gang of collector-connoisseurs. Which is a pity; for his tale is, in my view, a small masterpiece.

This short book, which in fact owes something to the author of *Lady Into Fox*, is briefly the story of how Mr. Chambers, a man living alone in a country cottage, is invited to play tennis at the vicarage and there meets a girl who revolutionizes his life by her extraordinary spiritual beauty and her capacity for unearthly passion. Mr. Chambers falls in love with her, more wooed against than wooing, and finds his life lifted by their mutual love to a rare plain of beauty, happiness, and suffering. Long before Persephone disappears, it is clear to the reader who she is and that, in fact, she will disappear as mysteriously from the life of Mr. Chambers as she has come into it. It is a beautiful story, touched with fancy and yet not fantastic, and in telling it Mr. Whitfield has used almost the only method open to him, that of purely detached gravity, telling the story in grave and lovely phraseology similar to that used by Mr. Garnett and by George Moore before him. It has only the faintest hint, here and there, of preciousness. Otherwise, I repeat, a small masterpiece.

I wish I could say the same for even one of the **Tales of Mourne**, by **Mr. Richard Rowley** (Duckworth, 6s.), but these tales of remote Ireland reveal a combination of sentimentality, coincidence, artificiality, and general naivety which embarrasses the critical mind greatly. There is no sentimentalism in this earth worse than Irish sentimentalism, and in this book it is allied to a method of coincidental fantasy more suited to tales for children than grown-ups.

* * *

A close second to the sentimentalizing of Ireland comes the sentimentality of the countryside. In **Wild Life in Moor and Fell**, by **Mr. W. R. Calvert** (Hodder and Stoughton, 12s. 6d.), you have an example of the method at its best. These stories of northern wild life, of young foxes, badgers and birds preying and fighting, so obviously based on first-hand knowledge, would have been excellent if told as fact. Dished up in the thin guise of fiction they lose character, fail to impress by their naive enthusiasm, and again could have been better suited to the children's hour than to the taste of the adult reader.