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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

Another Forsyte Family

Kate O'Brien

WITHOUT MY CLOAK. By KATE O'BRIEN.
Heinemann. 8s. 6d.

THE people of Miss O'Brien's novel are, with one notable exception, men and women of property. They might be described as Irish Forsytes. Their sun is gold and their moon is silver; their religion is made up of prayers which are dividends, and hymns which are balance-sheets; from their beginning in the eighteenth century down to their heyday at the end of Victoria's reign they worship the god of prosperity and success. Their lives are bound by a single mighty creed which might very well be "wealth for all and all for Considines." Art, love, leisure, religion, poetry, flowers, friendship—they are free to enjoy all these, but when it comes to a question of duty or honour or sacrifice they have no other gods before Considine's, the great wholesale forage house which bears their name. They breed, as Mr. Galsworthy's clan did, like rabbits. They are a family on a grand scale, they live on a grand scale and Miss O'Brien has drawn them on a grand scale. With three or four exceptions they are not lovable people, though their sins are hard to catalogue. They drink good wine, they abide by the law, they fear God and honour the King, they give splendid but sober parties, and they marry off their children into families exactly like their own. Yet they are a narrow, bigoted, grasping, pathetic clan. They would not have been worth Miss O'Brien's shrewd and careful observation but for the fact that some of them tried to revolt—and failed. Honest John Considine, a similar type to Mr. Galsworthy's stoical old men, produces an eldest son, Anthony, who builds an enormous house of red brick in the worst kind of taste; Honest John dies, leaves Anthony chairman of his business and Anthony produces an eldest son, Denis; both Anthony and Denis inherit Honest John's charm and horse-sense; Denis grows up exceedingly handsome and intelligent, half pulls down his father's offensive house, refashions the garden nearer to his heart's desire, and falls in love with a peasant girl. There is an exquisite and brief idyll before the family discover his outrageous sin. His uncle, a priest, catches him embracing the girl in the summer twilight by the river. The girl is

unhappily illegitimate. A Considine and *any* peasant girl!—oh! Holy Mother!—but a Considine and an illegitimate peasant girl!—Heavenly Father! that would be the ruination of them all! There is a scene of exquisite revolt, the girl is sent to America, and Denis pursues her hotly. For a brief space there is hope that one Considine will be something more than a Considine, but it flickers out. Denis returns, makes his peace, and the clan is consolidated. The Considines could never escape from themselves.

We are so used to Irish novels in which the prose is like a hail of bullets and where the characters are pursued relentlessly by their fates and the police, finally to die riddled by comrades' bullets, that this leisurely novel of Miss O'Brien's is almost shocking. She has taken an immense and intimidatory theme—the theme of prosperity eating like a canker into the souls of a great family from generation to generation—and except for her wordiness and her occasional heroics, she has handled it strongly and impressively. Her novel is very long and like most novels which are very long it could have been very much shorter. This seems to be the only serious blemish on her work. Her characters are certainly slow in coming to life, but when finally they do come to life they unquestionably live and move and have their being. They are not puppets moved by slick strings. They linger lightly in the mind; and I can think of no higher praise for their creator.****

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

SUCH WOMEN ARE RARE. By F. E. Bailey. Collins. 7s. 6d. The woman is the beautiful Lady Paula Frayne, who wanted a career, but was not to be bought with money. The man who was ready to buy her was a City financier who did not scruple to forge securities on which to borrow from the banks. A well told sensational story of love, expensive restaurants and City offices.***

THE VICAR'S WIFE. By Cicely Boag. Macmillan. 7s. 6d. An unsympathetic story of an unsympathetic woman who came to love her husband after she had kindled love in another man. Cold treatment of a subject that could have better been treated warmly.***

THE WHITE GODS. By Richard Friedenthal. Heinemann. 10s. 6d.—A long historical romance about Cortez and the conquest of Mexico told in the elaborate German manner, full of detail and fact, but highly dramatic all the same, and giving a living picture of the time. There are portraits of Cortez and Montezuma and other illustrations, and the book has the appearance of biography rather than fiction.***

AMBITION. By Bernhard Guttman. Heinemann. 7s. 6d.—Another German historical novel, but very different from the one mentioned above, for it is tightly compressed. It is a story of the hunchbacked Elector of Russia and William of Orange, and a brilliant account of German seventeenth-century life. Every character from the lowest to the highest is swayed by ambition, and the book consists of a series of episodes in which their ambitions are shown in conflict. An excellent piece of imaginative history.***

To enable readers to judge the merits of novels at a glance, we add stars to these short notices. Five stars denotes a masterpiece, four stars a novel of outstanding quality, and so down to one star.