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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

An Epic in Miniature

AN ADDER'S NEST. By VLADIMIR LEVSTIK. Translated from THE SLOVENE by F. S. COPELAND. Rodker. 7s. 6d. and 3s. 6d.

LEVSTIK is the author of several works besides *An Adder's Nest*, but this novel is looked upon by his countrymen as perhaps the greatest of his writings, for when it appeared it came to them as "a clarion call to freedom, to individual and national emancipation," the very call which for centuries they had been waiting. Levstik came of peasant stock, started to write before the War, spent some time in Paris, and came back to his own country just in time to be politically suspect and interned at the outbreak of the War. During the winter of 1916-17 he met a woman, a woman-farmer, seething with a great love of her native land and the soil she tilled. She fired his mind with her intense patriotism, her righteous anger, the strength of her personality, and the tragic tale of her life. He determined to write a book about her. It should be an epic—"a great novel, transcending every other tale in the world." The spirit of his determination was great, but the spirit of Mrs. Castel, his heroine, was greater, and he obeyed the will of Mrs. Castel. The book, instead of being of epic length, turned out to be a short novel, only a little over two hundred sparsely printed pages.

The Japanese are masters at the art of dwarfing trees; the process sometimes takes centuries and the results of their art are miniature trees, five or six inches in height, which have all the gnarled and twisted strength and antiquity of a great tree in a forest. This is exactly what Levstik has done with his novel. He intended it to be of immense girth, but he pruned it and pruned it until its proportions were dwarfed; and the result is that his novel, though small, carries all the power and greatness of the long epic of which he dreamed.

Mrs. Castel is the owner of a small farm. Her husband has died, leaving her with three sons and a host of creditors. She is a woman of iron—molten iron, however, hot, fierce, intensely vital. She defies fate, pays her creditors and brings up her sons also to be men of iron. "The devil of action urged her night and day. One year she would build, the next year she could make repairs. Between times she would buy, here a field, there a meadow, or elsewhere a bit of wooded hillside. It seemed as if there was a blessing on whatever Mrs. Castel put her hand to." She builds up a great farm. She amasses wealth, sends her sons to school in Prague. The soil and her sons are her whole life; the sons are bound up with the land; in time they shall inherit the earth. The blow to these dreams of Mrs. Castel's falls in 1914. Two sons enlist, and the third, like Levstik himself, is interned on some trivial charge of political conspiracy. Jozie and Tonic, who are in love with the daughters of the innkeeper Calyot, are killed. Mrs. Castel goes half-mad—only half-mad, ironically. She can still brood and suffer and yet be conscious of

suffering. Her iron spirit bends but does not break.

It is impossible to convey the effect of all this—of Mrs. Castel's iron yet tender soul, her intense love for her sons, the beauty of their love-affairs, the power and poignancy of Mrs. Castel's suffering, and the lyrical beauty with which Levstik has painted his native countryside. He is a poet and he possesses the true poet's anger and righteousness, and reverence for his art. His writing has the vital power and lyricism of sustained verse. His book has faults, but what does it matter so long as it also has the flame? Mrs. Castel is unforgettable.****

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Other Novels of the Week

MR. KETTLE—THIRD MATE. By C. J. Cutcliffe-Hyne. Ward, Lock. 7s. 6d. A story of the youth of the famous Kettle, when he was third mate; being involved in a row in Vera Cruz, he got put into gaol and found his ship away without him, so he attached himself to a pretty lady to make her Empress of Mexico. Incredible adventures of the true Captain Kettle kind make this a cheery book for dull days.***

SOT. By Leonid Leonov. Putnam. 7s. 6d. net. A novel of the Five Year Plan, with an introduction by Gorky, but so poorly translated that its merits are difficult to judge. It has, however, passages of power which transcend even the translation.***

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS. By V. Shishkov. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. Shishkov describes those colonies of lawless children which exist in Soviet Russia. They herd in cellars and under old boats and live generally by crime. These children love, bear children, contract syphilis, take drugs, thief, get drunk and fight like demons. Shishkov writes forcefully, evidently knows his subject, and has had better luck with his translator than Leonov. A terrible book.***

WILD RYE. By Muriel Hine. The Bodley Head. 7s. 6d. A pleasant story of late Victorian days in a Midland town giving a well-drawn picture of the period, and in particular of the growth of women's suffrage. Plenty of love.***

HARBOUR. By Philip MacDonald. Collins. 7s. 6d. A wandering sailor tramping through England finds himself involved in a murder mystery in a quiet village. Humour, thrills, romance make a very good mixture.***

RENFREW RIDES NORTH. By Laurie York Erskine. Appleton. 7s. 6d. Major Renfrew, of the Royal North-west Mounted Police, trails a murderer, encountering desperadoes, dope smugglers and Indians. Fine, clean out-of-door adventure yarn.***

EASTING DOWN. By Gregory Stapleton. Nash and Grayson. 7s. 6d. A sea story with a strong thread of love, romance, and plenty of sailing-ship atmosphere, about a girl whose sweetheart joined the tea-fleet to China in the last half of the nineteenth century.***

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