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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

Portrait of a Girl



Charles Morgan

Photo: Raphael

THE FOUNTAIN. By CHARLES MORGAN. Macmillan. 7s. 6d.

EARLY in 1915 a group of English officers, interned in Holland, find themselves being taken to a fort, where they are to remain under detention until the War is finished. Their confinement is only half-strict; they may walk out or they may even go to neighbouring towns on parole; they may read or plant flowers.

In due course they make the usual attempts at escape by tunnelling or bribing the guards, always without success, and finally they are given general parole. Lewis Allison, a shy, quiet, meditative man, has spent the days at the fort in research work and writing notes for a book, never taking advantage of parole and only half-heartedly interesting himself in escape, and on his release from the fort he is invited to go and continue his studies at the home of the Van Leyden's, a great castle, and he goes there with Ballater, his friend. There he meets an English girl, Julie, whom he knew as a child and who is now married to a German officer. He goes on studying in the castle library and she becomes his lover, conquering his cold, reticent nature by a beauty which Mr. Morgan has described in so many exquisite passages that I find it hard to choose one for quotation here. The following is slight, but typical:

As he watched he began to fancy that he was invisibly at her side; that her speech was secretly for him; that in her far-distant figure he could distinguish, not only the body's supple grace, but the tautening of her limbs as she ran, the wind's quickness in her hair and, as she swung her racquet, the tension of her breasts.

Long before this description of the girl occurs one is made conscious, by the slightest touches, apparently artless but in reality subtle and telling, of her beauty and the fire of her personality. Her presence haunts the pages like a dream and when she finally appears in the flesh her loveliness is like the fulfilment of a dream, something almost too fine and exquisite to be true. Whenever Mr. Morgan is describing her his prose quickens and his words fall into a

more enchanting order. She is drawn, with her beauty, her refined sensibilities and her tragic love, almost as perfectly as Emma Bovary. And in many ways Mr. Morgan's story is like Flaubert's for Julie's German husband returns, a living corpse, and the tale is given a sudden twist of irony and agony.

The Fountain, indeed, would seem to have been conceived and written in agony; its pages are full of the agony of love and of beauty, the agony of inward suffering, the agony of sacrifice, the agony of the sensitive soul. All, from the first chapter, is beauty and suffering. Mr. Morgan has, in this novel at least, no use or time for humour. His theme is in its very essence tragic and he has worked it out with a calm pity and understanding that have given his book a spiritual quality of grace and loveliness. His prose is sure and masterly, simple and elaborate by turns but never precious or hysterical. His prose often resembles George Moore's, though it lacks at once Moore's preciousness and that perfect lyrical touch of his which transcends mere preciousness. Very occasionally he seems guilty of the slightest over-emphasis. In a lesser novel one would not notice this, but in *The Fountain* the harmony is so fine that the slightest note out of tune seems to shriek its discord.

In the appreciation of modern fiction no two words, I suppose, have been more abused than the words "beautiful" and "masterpiece," until now a suspicion attaches to them. Nevertheless, I feel that *The Fountain* is a beautiful book, a novel, indeed, of great spiritual beauty, and that the portrait of Julie is a masterpiece.****

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

SALE BY AUCTION. By Geoffrey Dennis. Heinemann. 7s. 6d. The house sold by auction was one in which a young chemist's assistant committed suicide. It was in a Yorkshire country town in the 'eighties and 'nineties of last century. The characters are the young man, his wife, his employer, the auctioneer and a dozen people of the town. There is creative power in the characters, so that the book has great vitality. We are charmed by the old rascal, Paradine, who loved trickery for its own sake and went home from auctioneering to his beloved birds and cats. But the story is Mr. Dennis on holiday.****

MARINE PARADE. By Ivor Brown. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. A satire on a seaside resort in Dorset. Mr. Brown neither likes, nor is interested in, the place or people. Clever treatment of detail; the characters "as incapable of vice as virtue"; nothing to make our hearts beat faster.***

MY SISTER'S STORY. By Michael Ossorgin-Secker. 6s. A short novel by a distinguished Russian writer, a one-time revolutionary who was banished by the Bolsheviks. A touching domestic story of Russian provincial life.***

JUNGLE MAID. By Dale Collins. Harrap. 7s. 6d. How a millionaire thought he rescued a girl from South Sea cannibals and brought her to New York, where she is the sensation of the season. The whole thing is a fake, but the girl becomes a film star and repeats her sensational career in England. Packed with unblushing romance.***

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.