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## A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

*An Irish Master*

MIDSUMMER NIGHT MADNESS. By SEÁN O' FAOLÁIN. Cape. 7s. 6d.

THESE seven stories are all laid in Ireland against a background of political bitterness and unrest. In this one respect they resemble so many of the short stories and novels that come out of Ireland to-day. Here, however, resemblance ends, for, as Mr. Edward Garnett points out in his provocative introduction, Mr. O'Faoláin's work "is of finer artistic quality than his Irish contemporaries," and he goes on to say that, "if one wished to damn Seán O'Faoláin in the eyes of the vulgar, one would say he is a poet at heart."

Both these remarks are, I think, true, and significant. The artistry in these stories is of so fine a quality that it is difficult to keep from writing of it in terms of lavish superlatives, and the poet in Mr. O'Faoláin is so predominant that it completely outsoars in him the revolutionist, the propagandist and the reformer. The background of politics is never absent, but it is in each story subsidiary, overshadowed by the vividness of the characters and the lovely, mournful atmosphere of the Irish landscape, brooded over by dark austere mountains, across which they move.

The title story is, I think, the most striking example of Mr. O'Faoláin's extraordinary art, though *The Small Lady* and *Fugue* would themselves make any volume remarkable. But in *Midsummer Night Madness* the superb touches of contrast give this story an amazing strength and delicacy, the very texture of life and poetry woven together; the contrast of youth and age, of gentleness and bitterness, of sordidness and the ethereal beauty of night, all make this story pregnant in every line with beauty and power. An old Irish rake, old Henn of Henn Hall, is one of two men who seduce a young girl; Henn is depraved, old-fashioned, proud and courteous; the other, Stevey Long, is a revolutionary, loud-mouthed, ill-mannered, utterly without tradition; the girl is passionate and full-blooded. The character and feelings of these three people Mr. O'Faoláin has rendered most vividly. Henn, in his old battered bowler hat, with his unshakable traditions and his curious mixture of depravity and honour, stands out like a wintry old tree against two young saplings, a piece of contrast that is typical of Mr. O'Faoláin throughout the whole book.

Of the other stories *The Small Lady* and *Fugue* are also memorable. In the first the feeling of contrast is most subtly worked in again; the contrast of the monk against the drunkard, the ascetic, wintry atmosphere of the monastery against the *Small Lady*, and of she herself in turn against the young virgin boy to whom she gives her love before going to her execution. *Fugue* is slighter in story, but richer in poetry; built up like a fugue, it is full of the subtlest poetry of sound and silence:

When at last they ceased and our hearts returned to a normal beat we were come to a little low-flung wood of birch and rowan, the silver bark peeling in black stripes horizontally from the birch, the red berries of the rowan wind-blown on its delicate branches. Grey rocks covered the interstices of the trees and the sun fell sometimes on the rock to warm the cold colour: a stream twisted through the rough ground and its sound was soft and bass, and up on a sudden promontory who was working in a series of vigorous thrusts on a spade. We remained in the little wood for many hours, listening to the bass-viol of the falling water, to the wind pulling at the larch tops and shaking the tender

rowan, and sometimes listening with attention to the drumming of a lorry as it passed in and out of earshot in the near distance.

Such a passage, with its beautiful flowing rhythm, its light and shade, and its poetry, is typical of Mr. O'Faoláin's art. And that art is, I think, one of which we may expect the very highest things.\*\*\*\*\*

H. E. BATES

*Other Novels of the Week*

THE MISTRESS. By Gideon Clark. Grayson. 7s. 6d. She was a schoolmistress as well as one of the other sort. We doubt if a better sketch of the woman elementary school teacher's life has ever been done. The story is an affair between a married man and a teacher. The girl is presented with acute understanding and real sympathy. The man is not so convincing. A problem of love stated freshly.\*\*\*

THE MANOR HOUSE. By Netta Syrett. Bles. 7s. 6d. The son of the owner of Prior's Beeching and the daughter of his gardener are born on the same day in the early '90's. In the chequered story of their lives is symbolized the changes brought to England by the War. A wholly delightful and exciting romance firmly planted in the daily realities.\*\*\*\*\*

BALLET FOR THREE MASKS. By James Cleugh. Secker. 8s. 6d. A long novel about a young grocer, a young woman journalist and a young motor-car salesman. You would hardly believe what a fantastic London romance the author makes out of the interplay of their lives. Joyceish, high-spirited and intelligent.\*\*\*\*\*

THE SEVEN STARS. By André Malvil. Macmillan. 7s. 6d. A rich Frenchman forsakes fashionable Paris to retire to the Aran Islands so that he may write the story of his only love and her untimely death, and how he endeavoured to discover the secret of death. A tender, human book written with exquisite feeling. Well translated from the French.\*\*\*\*

THE FORLORN YEARS. By John Morrison. Collins. 7s. 6d. The story of a young Scotsman who, coming to London, lost everything—his friend, his work and his love. He went through the mill, and we leave him when he could hardly suffer any more; but the last words are "It's all right—now." A courageous and heartening book.\*\*\*

NO DECENCY LEFT. By Barbara Rich. Cape. 7s. 6d. On her twenty-first birthday Barbara Rich puts on a new dress, goes out for breakfast and encounters a remarkable taxi-man, as a result of which she marries the Prince and becomes a Queen. Unlike other dreams this one doesn't seem to end. Good fun.\*\*\*

THE MIMIC. By E. M. Keate. Sampson Low. 7s. 6d. Delightfully humorous, shrewd study of a well-born young girl who has the gift of perfect mimicry. The weakness of the book is that her peculiar endowment is made the *deus ex machina* of every situation. The book begins before the War.\*\*\*

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.