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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

Murder in the Glen



Neil M. Gunn

THE LOST GLEN. By NEIL M. GUNN. Porpoise Press. 7s. 6d.

EWAN MACLEOD, a young student, comes home to his native village in disgrace from the university. The feeling of his disgrace is in the air as he arrives and he feels it again as he meets his father and goes to his old home, and again and again as he meets old friends and acquaintances.

As if this business were not enough, he goes out fishing with his father, the boat is caught in a storm and his father is drowned. In saving himself he comes back to a world that is suspicious of him and he finds it hard to bear. Driven to work, he takes up a position of gillie to visitors at the neighbouring hotel. Among the permanent guests is an English colonel, who humiliates him persistently, in true Army manner, unable to forget his disgrace. The colonel's niece arrives for a holiday, takes Ewan as her gillie and subsequently as her lover, with disastrous and melodramatic results.

Mr. Gunn's publishers refer to him as the laureate of the Highlands, and from this superlative description of his talents one is led to expect, at least, something poetical. But Mr. Gunn, to my mind, is not so much like a laureate as a bricklayer building a wall, and a bricklayer, furthermore, who possesses his bricks and mortar, but who has forgotten to bring his tools. Mr. Gunn's bricks may be said to be the incidents of his story and his mortar the words with which he has built them together. Having no tools, he scrapes out a shallow foundation as he goes, dabs on his mortar with his hands, wasting it constantly, and finally produces an erection that looks tolerably like a wall, but which the first adverse wind must blow down at once.

From the beginning Mr. Gunn is slipshod and careless. His style, an ill mixture of obscurity and outspokenness, fails for fifty pages to produce either conviction or atmosphere. He succeeds in making one know of Ewan's disgrace but not in making one believe in it. He goes back over his ground, trying to produce that all-important feeling of conviction by repetition, but he never does so, and it is not until the introduction of the colonel and his niece, Clara Marlowe, that the story begins to carry any life or semblance of truth at all. Then, for a short time, Mr. Gunn's wall grows straighter and stronger. One believes in the colonel, pure type though he is, and the physical presence of the girl is most admirably realized, so that the scenes in which she moves are quick and beautiful. One begins

to understand also the agony of Ewan, still conscious of his disgrace, torn between his love of her and his hatred of the colonel. But finally Mr. Gunn, as though not knowing quite how to fathom a difficult and interesting situation, resorts to that unailing remedy—death, and not only death, but murder, and the end of his wall becomes grotesque.

Mr. Gunn is the oddest mixture of talent and carelessness.* He can write with force, his conversations are often admirable, and he can build interesting situations. But what is one to say of this?—

"Sex, after all, meant life. . . . It made the body feel a lovely thing, as if a lily had got flushed with rose.

"And slightly restless.

"Humanity—or was it Puritanism?—was like that: it would kill anything lovely by giving it a 'real' name. . . .

"But . . .

"She wondered."***

A most disappointing book.***

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

SARTORIS. By William Faulkner. Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d. The Sartoris are an old Southern family and their story is given for the years between the Civil War and the Great War. The theme is racial decline. Readers who found Mr. Faulkner's previous books difficult are advised to read this one. For full beauty of writing there is nothing to surpass to-day what this writer can do; he is gaining for himself an unchallengeable position.***

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE. By Radclyffe Hall. Cape. 7s. 6d. A carpenter's son of Provence has spiritual power which neither he nor anyone else fully recognizes; serving in the Great War in Palestine he walks out into the enemy lines saying "with these hands I bring you God's peace," and is crucified by the Turks. A strange story told with passion that shows unexpected depths of emotion in this author.***

THE DRY PICKWICK. By Stephen Leacock. John Lane. 5s. Mr. Pickwick's dream of a Christmas at Dingley Dell under Prohibition, and how Mr. Wardle, draining a bumper of bootleg liquor, dies instantaneously, is the theme of the first story. In the others Mr. Leacock's imagination plays with the Next War, Inflation and Deflation, and the Dentist's Parlour. But the funniest story is a skit on *Ivanhoe*, in which Locksley, instead of splitting a willow wand with an arrow, holes out in one at the golf club. The rollicking humour of this book will banish the deepest depression.***

MORNING GLORY. By Colette. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. One of Colette's latest books written in the first person, containing her reflections as an old woman on her husbands and her old mother. Witty, wise, sometimes scandalous, it is the most human book she has written, which is saying a great deal.***

CALEB'S CONQUEST. By Joseph Hocking. Ward Lock. 7s. 6d. An incredibly old-fashioned story of a Cornish farmer boy who not only makes a fortune in tin-mining, but discovers he is the son of the local magnate. The book is crammed with every old tag known in fiction.*

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.