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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

# Making History Live



Margaret Irwin

ROYAL FLUSH. By MARGARET IRWIN. Chatto and Windus. 8s. 6d.

FOR some reason or other the historical novel is often regarded as a second-rate, tedious form of literature, only to be associated with examination papers, a hashing-up of the kings and queens, the soldiers and courtiers, the plots and battles of the history book itself, and persons of the younger generations at least cannot bear the name of Scott. His characters to them seem stuffy and dull, his descriptions oppressively elaborate, his exciting moments like peas lost in haystacks.

When I read that *Royal Flush* was not an historical novel in the ordinary sense—the ordinary sense generally meaning the Scott tradition—I was sceptical, since it is not a common thing to make a queen and king speak like human beings and to portray princes and princesses as though they were not so many cherubim and seraphim. But Miss Irwin has disregarded traditions and she refuses to write of the Duchess of Orleans or the King of England in that bastard kind of English which has helped more than anything to drag the English historical novel so despicably low. Having no use for quoths and prithees, methinks and doths, avants and avasts, she writes a good, honest, simple, straightforward style, analyzing the emotions of her characters acutely and calmly. She is not awed by the blueness of her characters' blood. A dauphin or a princess are no more to her than a boy or girl from Manchester or Pimlico. They talk as naturally, are capable of the same suffering, the same fears and joys.

"What do you do for your spots?"

"What spots?"

"Why—just spots. Our chambermaids sometimes tie raw beef on our faces at night to make our skins good, but that makes a horrid mess. When I am grown up I shall use face cream. . . ."

It is this kind of thing which brings Miss Irwin's people alive to us. Her book is thick with characters—so thick that she has had the

sense to append a genealogical tree—but none of them is a mere puppet in velvet and silk and none of them is boring. Her heroine is "Minetta"—"princess of England, Duchess of Orleans, who linked so dramatically the fate of her brother, Charles II., with that of her cousin Louis XIV. We see the brief course of her life from that of a pathetic little pauper to the most brilliant woman of her age."

What this bald statement covers it is difficult to convey. It would seem to indicate that *Royal Flush* is a mere chronicle simply and ably written, but the book is in fact a long drama; admirably sustained. The prose is fresh and intelligent, the scenes quiver with reality. Above all these are pages of great beauty—an unusual word to associate with written history.

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H. E. BATES

## Other Novels of the Week

THANK HEAVEN FASTING. By E. M. Delafield. Macmillan. 7s. 6d. A satire of Edwardian woman and marriage. An authentic picture of Eaton Square in the period. Miss Delafield is merciless and highly accomplished, and her novel will rank as social history.\*\*\*\*

DREAM OF DESTINY AND VENUS RISING FROM THE SEA. By Arnold Bennett. Cassell. 7s. 6d. The first is an unfinished novel concerning a man who met a girl he had first met in a dream. Has amazing detail of London life and the stage. These stories show Arnold Bennett in the perfection of his latest manner.\*\*\*

SHIP IN THE NIGHT. By Robert Neumann. Davies. 7s. 6d. Stories told by a group of cosmopolitans on board a doomed ship while waiting for the catastrophe. They cover the whole range of human emotions, from the humorous to the macabre. A magnificent conception, carried out with masterly dramatic power.\*\*\*\*

CROSS WINDS. By Elinor Mordaunt. Secker. 7s. 6d. A story of a young man and woman who met and parted, then the man heard that the woman was being tried for the murder of her husband in Java. He rushes out to her, but before he can arrive she is acquitted. They marry. Then the ghosts of past events begin to walk in their lives. A fine psychological tale.\*\*\*

BRIGHT SKIN. By Julia Peterkin. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. A negro romance. Nothing heroic about the characters, but they have the glow of real life. The book will win the admiration of every reader who can stand the dialect.\*\*\*\*

THE YOUNG REVOLUTIONIST. By Pearl S. Buck. Methuen. 3s. 6d. A beautiful, tender and exquisitely written story of two Chinese boys who run away from the temple to which they have been vowed, join Sun Yat Sen's army, and come for the first time in contact with Western ideals.\*\*\*\*

SPARKS FLY UPWARD. By Oliver La Farge. Lane. 7s. 6d. Brilliantly realistic interpretation of Mexican life, with its strange mixture of Indian peasant and Castilian aristocrat.\*\*\*\*

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.