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## A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

*A New Scottish Novelist*

Orgill Mackenzie

THE CROOKED LABURNUM. By ORGILL MACKENZIE. Dent. 7s. 6d.

THE claim that Mrs. Mackenzie's work is neither Kailyard nor anti-Kailyard is justified by *The Crooked Laburnum*. She does not appear to have been influenced by any of her Scottish contemporaries; she has little in common with the author of *The House with the Green Shutters* and still less with the most overrated writer in Scottish letters, the boy who has forgotten to wipe the treacle from his fingers. Unlike these writers she has no need to brutalize or to sentimentalize her characters in order to make them strong or touching. She writes calmly and quietly, if anything too calmly and quietly, but at least she never raves and above all she never weeps about the scenes and characters.

She has taken for her story a Scots blacksmith and his sick wife and two daughters. MacPhail is a dour, suspicious, vindictive man, a drinker and a boaster and his wife is one of those fretful invalids in whom the last strength has turned to a tenacious bitterness. The daughters, Effie and Lizzie, mature early, Lizzie restless and anxious to go out into the world, Effie dour and cautious and practical but capable also, like her mother, of the profoundest suffering. When Mrs. MacPhail dies and Lizzie leaves home and Effie is left to keep house for MacPhail the stage is set for a tragedy of sacrifice and suffering which intensifies as the book goes on.

The victim of Mrs. Mackenzie's tragedy is Effie. MacPhail, after coming into a legacy, dies; her friends also die or forsake her or burden her, like her sister, with tragedies of their own; her lover misunderstands her. The laburnum tree itself, which Mrs. Mackenzie has made a protagonist in the drama, seems also to grow, like life, more harsh and twisted. There appears to be no chance of her escape from the inexorable bitterness of life.

The world in which these things happen is, like the world of *Cranford*, extremely narrow. The horizon is never very distant, and except on one occasion the characters never escape from the confinement of it. But here, as in *Cranford*, emotions are fundamental and Effie's suffering is the universal suffering of woman. She is saved from the absolute depths of tragic misery because Mrs. Mackenzie, like Mrs. Gaskell, appears to be too charitable at heart or too timid as an artist to let her go on to the bitterest end.

This is responsible for the one important weakness of the book. The grimness of the early chapters leads steadily on to an intensity of spiritual suffering which eventually breaks, leaving Effie to go on smoothly to a happy ending. The feeling that she is born to suffer is so powerfully conveyed that the sweetness of her fate seems not only tame but out of character. The spell is broken; one's sympathy with Effie collapses; the reunion with her lover seems a little facile, too much according to book; when the laburnum tree also becomes a symbol of easy happiness one is reminded of the flowery close-ups of films that depict love wronged and love triumphant.

If I have stressed what appears to me this defect in the book it is not because I feel that Mrs. Mackenzie's work lacks fundamental strength and beauty. On the contrary *The Laburnum Tree* moves me to admiration. It has the cold sharp beauty of a northern spring and the austere strength of northern hills. It is fresh and full of life.\*\*\*\*

H. E. BATES

*Other Novels of the Week*

TORRYZANY. By Wallace B. Nichols. Ward, Lock. 7s. 6d. Historical novel about the great sixteenth-century Italian sculptor who designed the tomb of Henry VII in the Abbey. It reaches a superb level of drama, reality, and spiritual beauty.\*\*\*\*

FORGET-ME-NOT. By Joseph Shearing. Heinemann. 7s. 6d. A brilliantly alive, realistic and beautifully written reconstruction of a scandal in high circles in France of the 1840's. Is "Joseph Shearing" Mrs. Belloc Lowndes? This is a masterpiece of the second order.\*\*\*\*

RETURN BELPHEGOR. By Sherard Vines. Wishart. 7s. 6d. A satire. The theme being an organized attempt by Satan to combat scepticism, which threatens him with annihilation. Witty and a good idea.\*\*\*

A PROFESSIONAL CHRISTIAN. By J. C. Hardwick. Cape. 7s. 6d. A temporary gentleman becomes a parson and makes up his mind to a career. An intimate, honest and rather caustic study of the present position of the Church of England by a well-known clergyman.\*\*\*

THE MARRIAGES OF GEORGIA, by Lady Troubridge. Hutchinson. 7s. 6d. A wonderfully keen study of an American girl in England, whose vast wealth cuts her off inch by inch from life, love, and happiness.\*\*\*

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.