By RICHARD CHURCH

Variations on a Triangle

MR. F. L. GREEN, with two previous novels, has attracted the notice of critics and public. His third, **Give Us the World** (Michael Joseph, 8s.), is the first I have read, and at once it has awakened in me that responsive surprise which an original spirit always commands. To begin with, the theme of the story is unusual. What is more unusual, however, is the point of view behind the story; the motive of it, and the way in which it is related to the characters who make it. Mr. Green combines a simplicity of mind, almost a primitiveness, with a corresponding subtlety in the observance of human qualities and their conflict. This might be expected, for the unsophisticated mind is often the shrewdest, just as the illiterate one has the best memory. It is a matter of necessity.

Give Us the World is the tale of two friends and the intrusion of a woman. When it begins, Farne and Branche have been in partnership for ten years. Branche is fifty, and Farne thirty. They are professional swimmers, free-lances, who make their living during the summer by giving displays and coaching people round the seaside resorts of the Ulster coast. In the off-season, they retire to a five-roomed bungalow inherited by Farne from his father, a doctor. They live there a sort of Swiss Family Robinson life, resting, gardening, occasionally visiting their only neighbours, Mary Magdalen and her drunken husband, Peter, a picturesque couple who own a fine old farmhouse which they allow to tumble into ruins about them while they spend their lives between love-making and violent quarrels.

* * *

Thus the scene is set. The story begins to move when Farne goes into Belfast to buy a cap. The girl in the shop is black-haired, lovely, lithe, and friendly. They fall in love at once, and he, seeing how restless she is, proposes that she shall come out with him that night to the bungalow. Hesitantly, but with a sense of adventure, she does so.

Of course, trouble is bound to follow. Old Branche, crusty bachelor, jealous as a hen, resents the intrusion of this disturbingly beautiful woman and her gracious ways. But he too falls under her spell, though he will never admit to doing so. Farne is inarticulate and simple, and almost leaves Branche to suggest later that the odd relationship shall be put right by marriage between the lovers. Rita, the girl, again hesitates, because she sees no way out of this triangle, and foretells that it must become stalemate unless she can command, as most women want unconsciously to command, the whole allegiance of her man. She sees this strange, deep-rooted friendship between the two men, part professional, part mystical and poetic, as a relationship so aloof and ideal that it is likely to freeze the warm springs of love between man and woman.

In spite of this foreboding, and ashamed of her jealousy, she agrees to the marriage, and for a time all goes well. The first summer tour of the three of them is a great success. Love between man and wife is triumphant, and the friendship of the two men appears to be embellished rather than spoiled by it. But with the return to the winter retreat, monotony sets in. The wife's spirit begins to chafe against the restrictions of this conservative relationship, with its athletic ritual which means nothing to her. It baulks her growing ambitions, and she sees that it will affect her coming child too.

She is right. The child is a boy, and at once the two men begin to plan to include him in their exalted sodality. The woman is more than ever an outsider. War breaks out again, intermittent, with interludes of peace and tenderness between Rita and Branche, while the simple husband smiles and goes his own way. He refuses to budge. Rita's plans for a world tour, for posts on ocean liners as instructors, leave him unmoved. He wants only to carry on as he did before he met her. But Branche begins to age. Illness and accident overtake him, and finally he is broken, and has to give up his swimming. Farne is without a partner, and begins to train his son, now a fine little fellow of seven with a genius for the water. Rita is no nearer to victory, in spite of her persistence.

* * *

What would you think should be the solution of this conflict? Will you agree with the author? I cannot, for I find his method of cutting the strings which he has so skilfully plaited too melodramatic and arbitrary. To me, the last page is a violent intrusion in a tale that represents a real world of exquisite sensibility and deep feeling. This does not prevent me, however, from appreciating Mr. Green's work, and his fine directness of style, which is seldom marred by self-conscious literary effort. These men, the boy, Rita, and the sloven neighbours, are presented as lively elements in an environment of sea, starlight, wind and sun; and these forces both human and panic are forced home upon the reader. I should like to quote two or three passages to illustrate the fullness of the work. Here is one which gives the key to the story. "The friendship between the men. She realized it at last. She saw what it had achieved. Its noble qualities, its simple virtues, and a strength which her love for Farne had never achieved. It was altogether a finer, stronger association. Its great test was its power to withstand her arguments, her passion and fulminating demands. No matter what she offered Farne to entice him to come away with her, no matter what prospects or promises, he demurred, set them aside, said that it was hard to decide and that he needed time. But she knew what compelled him at this time. His friendship with Branche. It was the ultimate factor. He and Branche were inseparable." That is well done; direct, dignified.

Sir Philip Gibbs.

* * *

It seems premature to review the new instalment of **Sir Philip Gibbs's** topical saga of the events of the war. The material is too raw for critical dissection. What is astonishing, and calls for admiration, is the way in which this famous war-correspondent of the 1914–1918 prologue can use his experience of those distant days to guide himself through the chaos and débris of the present moment, and to find a significance in what is happening.

This Nettle, Danger, Sons of the Others, and *Blood Relations*, together with the new book, **The Amazing Summer** (Hutchinson, 8s. 6d.), may be said to be a new form of war record. These are novels, because they weave tales of the lives and characters of a set of imagined folk not too distinctly individualized; folk who are rather types of the English race, presented in a water-colour medium, in the manner of Russell Flint. But what is so interesting and absorbing is the way in which these puppets, innocent figurines, react to the tremendous events in a sort of lowest common denominator way, an *average* way, so that their stories are those of any of us to-day as we face the demands of the battle against the Germans; the air raids; the preparations for the great counterblow which must shortly be delivered; the waiting and the suffering and the succouring.

A handsome young airman crashes in France on June 12, and with more human flotsam, whom he picks up on his way, escapes to Dieppe and over the water. A French aristocrat, equally handsome, who has helped him, follows suit and arrives in England. Then comes the scene of London and the English countryside during the past winter, with the effects upon our highbrow, lowbrow, rustic and urban sections of the community. Love and play, endurance and resolution, all have their part in the tale. It is a part with which we are familiar, from the seven o'clock news until the midnight news.

HERE we come a-piping
In Springtime and in May:
Green fruit a-ripening,
And Winter fled away.
The Queen she sits upon the strand,
Fair as lily, white as wand:
Seven billows on the sea,
Horses riding fast and free,
And bells beyond the sand.

ANONYMOUS.

O'BRIEN'S ANNUAL YARD-STICK

By H. E. BATES

A YEAR ago, reviewing the *Best Short Stories* here, I suggested that its editor might, in a preface to the next year's volume, make something of an anniversary of the fact that he had been selecting these stories for twenty-five years. Unhappily, the **Best Short Stories of 1940: English and American** (Cape, 8s. 6d.) is not an anniversary but a memorial, for its editor died suddenly within a few days of its publication.

Mr. E. J. O'Brien was a Bostonian, who for many years had lived in England—I think part of his heart was in both countries—and whose life-study had been the short story. To the general public the regular appearance of a volume which presumed to label a handful of stories as the best of the year was perhaps never very important; the public cared little for short stories, let alone an arbitrary selection of the best. But to every short-story writer who took himself seriously, the *Best Short Stories* was an indispensable yard-stick by which, year after year, he could measure himself and his work.

O'Brien, I think, meant the volume to be that; he knew that his own best stories were not necessarily those of other people, and he knew that there was no such thing as definitive judgement. The volume was an indication as well as a measure. It attempted to show not only what the short story had accomplished, but where it might be going. As soon as a new writer showing anything like a new tendency arrived, O'Brien, with indefatigable energy, tracked him down. He had seen the short story emerge from what he called a "frozen literary convention" in which "men and women were two-dimensional, mere silhouettes cut out of coloured paper," to the thing of organic substance given new vitality by such people as Coppard, Hemingway, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Katherine Ann Porter, Erskine Caldwell, V. S. Pritchett, Malachi Whitaker, Saroyan, and many others on both sides of the Atlantic.

Many writers of stories, among them Leslie Halward, Douglas Boyd, A. E. Coppard, Oliver Gossman and Saroyan himself, owe their earliest appearances to O'Brien's judgement and enthusiasm. In America he helped to found *Story* and encouraged every little magazine from Virginia to the Pacific; in England, where he had a hand in the foundation of three story magazines, he not only encouraged writers but found them work and put his hand in his pocket. It will be hard, and very probably impossible, to replace him.

* * *

This year's volume is typical of his enthusiasm for pointing out new and significant tendencies. For in the English section, which purports also to be Irish, no fewer than one-third of the writers are Welsh. Ten years ago that would have been impossible; the Welsh tradition of coal-valleys, chapels, revivals and sex was already in danger of going sour. To-day the stories of Geraint Goodwin, Margiad Evans, Rhys Davies, Edgar Howard, Glyn Jones, Gwyn Jones and Alun Lewis have some of the nervous and eager colour that characterized the Irish short story when O'Flaherty, O'Faolain and O'Connor were at their best. O'Connor is the year's lonely representative of the new Ireland, whose literary decadence runs parallel with the country's political severance with England. There are stories also by Malachi Whitaker, Leslie Halward, Eric Knight, Oliver Gossman, G. F. Green, and V. S. Pritchett, of which Pritchett's comic masterpiece, *The Saint*, is outstanding.

On the American side Caldwell, Callaghan, Saroyan, Jesse Stuart, Katherine Ann Porter and Hemingway are the stars, and Hemingway's story of the Spanish War, *Under the Ridge*, gives the impression that there is still no better writer of stories alive.

AFOOT and light hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good fortune, I myself am good fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms.
Strong and content I travel the open road.

WALT WHITMAN: *Song of the Open Road.*