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WORKING-CLASS TALES

Reviews by H. E. BATES

READERS of JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY will need no introduction to the stories of **Mr. Leslie Halward**; with two volumes of stories he has put himself straight into the first rank of young short story writers in this country. As shown by **The Money's All Right** (Michael Joseph, 7s. 6d.), he is a remarkable writer in several ways.

In an age when it appears to be fashionable to write about the working-class, it is good to come upon a writer who has sprung from the working-class himself, is neither ashamed nor proud of it, and who understands how and what the people of that class eat, feel, think, do, and speak. In his documentation of the speech of working people alone Mr. Halward ought to be a lesson to many more fashionable writers of the so-called Left. One of his larger virtues is that he is never impelled to feel sorry for his people. He has learned very early one of the supreme lessons of short story writers—the art of presenting his people with pure objectivity, so that you never catch him obtruding himself between scene and reader, and saying in effect, "Look, this is the way these people live. Don't you pity them? Isn't it awful?" No, there are no tears wept by Mr. Halward, no political drums beaten. His talent, so far as we see it developed now, is completely unpoetic, unpretentious, and undramatic.

At present these are virtues; later they may become defects. In other words, how is Mr. Halward going to develop? At present his field is limited. Within this field he works with assurance, insight, and a fine detached understanding. Since his grasp of essentials could hardly be bettered, it is now a question of how far he can enlarge his field. He could experiment with no loss, and probably great gain, to himself. For example, throughout the whole of these twenty-six stories he hardly touches the edge of an emotional conflict, and he appears to keep the poet in himself under lock and key. Sooner or later he must be faced with the choice of repeating himself or of taking a wider risk. If he can do this it is quite clear, judging by *The Money's All Right*, that he will become a considerable force in the short story during the next few years.

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In direct contrast to Mr. Halward in almost every way, **Mr. John Gloag** is the born and inveterate experimenter. He is acrobat, conjurer,

tight-rope walker, and mystery man rolled into one. He is so versatile, in fact, that if you were to take any one story from **It Makes a Nice Change** (Nicholson and Watson, 7s. 6d.) you could say it had been written by someone else. You could never make that mistake with Mr. Halward. Mr. Gloag's great specialities are murder, experiments in time, lunacy, and the trick ending. Several of his stories have been specially prepared for broadcasting, and he believes, as he says in a preface, that broadcasting demands a special technique from the writer of stories. This has been for a long time one of the criticisms of *Portland Place*, where there appears to be a belief that new techniques are evolved by the wave of a wand. It is probably no accident that Mr. Gloag's poorest stories are those conjured specially for Broadcasting House. In any case, Mr. Gloag must pay the penalty of all trick writers—the trick works once but never quite the same again. And he ought to know, being a clever writer with a keen interest in Time, that Time plays funny tricks with stories where tricks are the substitutes of plain truth, observation, and character.

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The fifteen tales in **Big Frogs and Little Frogs**, by Miss Susan Ertz (Hodder and Stoughton, 7s. 6d.), have that intentional high-gloss polish so typical of the magazine paper on which, I fancy, they were first printed. I can find nothing here, in these urbane, conventional, and cosmopolitan episodes, calculated to excite the connoisseur for five minutes. But the title story, with its all-too-true picture of a dinner of a London literary club, and the sketch, *Too Much Education*, a pointed comment on American life to-day, redeem a pretty ordinary volume.
