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Y - Edited by E. B. Osborn

NEW FICTION

Nastiness and Nobility in the War

By H. E. BATES

Invasion 14. By Maxence van der Meersch. (Constable, 8s. 6d.)

Mollénard. By G. P. Gilbert. (Robert Hale, 7s. 6d.)

Peopls in Cages. By Helen Ashton. (Cassell, 7s. 6d.)

Nine Days Wonder. By Gwyn Jones. (Gollancz, 8s. 6d.)

Casals Indoons. By Helen Hall. (Golden Sanderson, 7s. 6d.)

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* carving cherry- by, when asked s equivalents of doucauld. The diffuse for the claim. It tends rboostly such as ad the doctrins mes (Morley's gain, a modern -collecting his to me that any :might just as ka stroked out ep. Bacon, no slish literature nd many of his story of the years 1914-18 is lived by those who remained in the occupied districts of France, and behind the German lines. The centre of its canvas is Boubaix, where M. van der Meersch himself was born. Its characters, of which there are literally scores, are French townfolk of all kinds and classes, Belgians, and, of course, German soldiers. There is no central character. All characters are equally centralised by common catastrophe. What M. van der Meersch is out to show is not the suffering of one man or the aspect of one side, but the suffering of all men of whatever side.

* This we see not only the nobility and suffering of French patriots but the meanness of French patriots, the duplicity and complicity, the petty jealousies, the small hatreds, the spying, the favouring, the betrayal; similarly we see not only the brutality of the invaders, but their peculiar suffering, their humanity which is whitewashed. The profiteering French bourgeois, filling their pockets while their fellowmen starve, are drawn with the same unflinching clarity as the Germans, who beat their prisoners till they cannot stand or see.

Plus and Minus

For myself, I see this book as a huge fictional ledger, with its columns of profit and loss set down with unbiased accuracy for the reader himself to balance. On the one side, nobility, religion, love, suffering, and so on; on the other side, hatred, meanness, bestiality, cruelty, tragedy, and so on. How it adds up each reader must decide for himself. For me, it adds up primarily to show two things: in the first place, a huge debit on the side of war; in the second, a huge balance of praise in favour of Mr. van der Meersch. In short "Invasion 14" is, by its standards, an excellent and splendid achievement.

"Mollénard" is also from the French. It is well translated by Mr. Wars Bradley Wells, which reminds me that "Invasion 14" is splendidly translated by Mr. Gerard Hopkins. Neither book reads as if rendered by a man holding a French primer in one hand and an English dictionary in the other. Mollénard is a French sea-captain, a sort of sea-faring Samson, a man of power and fabulous reputation in the China seas, a gun-runner, a hard drinker, a genius of a sailor, a man of many enemies. Back home in Dunkirk, he leaves a wife who is a kind of bourgeois Delilah, a woman who wears the iron corsets of respectability. She hates Mollénard, fears him, and finally helps to bring him to his grave. It is a singularly absorbing, powerful book, deeply psychological, done with ease and that almost shocking logicity which is a basic characteristic of much French literature. If you like your novels in the southe style, don't attempt "Mollénard." If you like something tougher, altogether fiercer, let me recommend it.

"Peopls in Cages" might, not unfairly, be called a conjuring trick novel. This is not to accuse Miss Ashton of cheapness or trickery; far from it. Her book goes deeper than that. But what she does, in effect, is to stand up and say, "Observe, ladies and gentlemen, the Zoo on a summer afternoon. Observe, on the one hand, the animals in the cages. Observe, and finally, hey presto! observe the people in their cages." In this way Miss Ashton produces out of the hat a series of clever, satirical, amusing, and touching contrasts. "What we keep in cages is same enough," a keeper says; "the wild ones walk through and through the turnstiles."

All in Our Cages

The moral of Miss Ashton's trick is that we are all in cages ourselves. But, like a good novelist, she does not point it. She is content to show us her diverse group of people, the financier who is wanted for swindling, the couple who are unhappy, the little hunchback who makes his fateful choice at the expense of freedom and all the rest, and then their counterpart behind the bars, and leaves us to our own conclusions.

"Nine Days Wonder" is a smart-Alick book, with murder and jealousy as its central theme. Two step-brothers in Manchester, one a poet, the other almighty and worldly, both get entangled with a woman of much reputation and no virtue. The poet murders her, and the other is very nearly hanged for it. The book is supercharged with a sort of brazen slickness, and is insensitive to the nth degree, and is, altogether, about as bad a book as I hope to read this year. What around Mr. Jones's interest in this vicious, boring group of people I do not know, but if his book lasts much longer than the length of time implied in his title I shall, for one, be very surprised.

"INVASION 14" is a war-book. But of the hundreds of war-books published in this country, in Europe and in America not one, I think, ever had quite the same theme and setting as M. van der Meersch's. "It is," the publishers claim, "unlike any other war-book so far published." They are right. "Invasion 14" is unique. I do not suppose there will be more than one reader in ten thousand, in England at any rate, for whom its scenes will be familiar.

This book has no plot, in the accepted sense, that a reviewer can summarise. Yet, in spite of its scores of characters, its huge canvas, and its considerable length, its whole story can be summed-up in one sentence. "Invasion 14" is therefore the story of the years 1914-18 as lived by those who remained in the occupied districts of France, and behind the German lines. The centre of its canvas is Boubaix, where M. van der Meersch himself was born. Its characters, of which there are literally scores, are French townfolk of all kinds and classes, Belgians, and, of course, German soldiers. There is no central character. All characters are equally centralised by common catastrophe. What M. van der Meersch is out to show is not the suffering of one man or the aspect of one side, but the suffering of all men of whatever side.

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"CASALS INDOONS" is a rather gossipy little drama on the American domestic scene. Its comic counterpart holds small town audiences spell-bound. Arnold Carlow, agreeable, volatile, loses his wife and is left to guide the destinies of three children. All the conventional characters of such situations are here: the designing sister, her wise, gentle husband, the hating sister-in-law, and so on. The book is competent, agreeable, occasionally moving, occasionally sentimental. Easily digested, it is good influenza literature—a statement which, unhappily, I have confirmed by experience.

"BARBADOS—BARRAS WAY INDOONS," by Raymond Savage (Barker, 5s.), is a personally conducted tour to beauty of place and health of person, an enticement to tourists, which might have been a little better illustrated, but provides a quantity of just the requisite information.

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