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The Short Story of To-day



An illustration from *The Golden Cockerel Press* edition of the stories of A. E. Coppard reviewed on this page

By H. E. Bates

self-denial. Nevertheless, her work is fine and delicate, and if it is truer to art than to life it does at least touch life.

In the work of A. E. Coppard are to be found characteristics which neither Mrs. Whitaker nor Miss Warner possess: his work is robust, full-blooded, strongly-coloured stuff, rich with arresting metaphors, odd conversations, and the queerest characters. It is both realistic and fantastic, broadly comic and ironically tragic. There is no other writer in England to-day who writes even remotely like him; there is no writer, indeed, whom it would be so dangerous to imitate.

In the story, *Crotty Shinkwin*, his fantasy has run riot; in *The Beauty Spot* he has told a story of everyday life, realistic and deeply psychological: so that here may be seen the two elements which have always been most strongly evident in his work. Of the two stories, *The Beauty Spot* is the most interesting and most successful as a work of art; here his feet are planted firmly on the earth, and when Coppard's feet are planted firmly in the earth his work is often as strong and solid as an oak. This edition of these two stories is, by the way, a fine example of modern English printing.

Those who study the modern short-story ought to welcome the appearance of a new writer of stories, in James Stern, whose book, *The Heartless Land*, is a collection of African stories. There is no Imperialistic nonsense about this book, and none of the provincialism which so often marks the work of those who write of colonial life.

Without exception these stories are grim and bitter accounts of the lives of remote settlers and their wives and working Kaffirs; they are full of conflict and tragedy, chiefly the conflict of men against men and race against race. Women have only the smallest part in this life, but when they appear they bring with them an atmosphere of hopelessness and melancholy which is difficult to bear. There have been very few better books of African life than *The Heartless Land*.

Modern Tales of Horror is an interesting and exciting collection, but more exciting because of its horrors than interesting because of its writing. Nevertheless a few stories have qualities both as literature and as thrillers; William Faulkner's, *A Rose for Emily*, is one of these, and André Maurois, *The House*, another. This is a collection to read in daylight.

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THE art of Mrs. Malachi Whitaker is one of the most arresting, even though one of the quietest, in contemporary literature. With her first book of stories, *Frost in April*, now re-issued cheaply in "The Travellers' Library," she came forward not as an experimentalist or an amateur in the exacting and difficult art of the short story, but as a mature writer in sure command of her material; so sure and mature was she, in fact, that she at once raised doubts in one's mind, doubts as to her ability to advance upon that maturity or even to sustain it.

Had her stories been flashy and brilliant, relying on clever manipulations and stage devices for their effects, these doubts would have been greater then and very probably realised by now; but her methods were quiet and sound; for her effect she relied on no tricks and not even on a fine prose style.

She was concerned with simple and fundamental things, the daily lives of simple and inarticulate men and women, their hopes, joys, fears, loves, jealousies, tragedies, and she looked into their lives with an eye that was almost disturbingly penetrative and acute, so that she not only saw into her characters but often through them.

This power of hers was responsible for many curious contrasting qualities in her work; she was at once ironical and sympathetic, warm but unsentimental, tragic and comic, casual but profound. The people of whom she wrote were her own people, Yorkshire country people or city dwellers; and it is perhaps the greatest tribute one can pay to her that

volume quite so masterly as the story, *Something Funny*, from *Frost in April* with its subtle beginning: "Arthur Proyle fell in love with a barmaid whose name was Mimmy. . . . Proyle was troubled," and perhaps the story *Frost in April* itself still remains her masterpiece, but there is not a story among the twenty-five which is not interesting or which does not contain something, however small, that is memorable.

Spring Day at Stater's End renders beautifully the feeling of age and childhood; there is something strange and touching about *The Man with the Harelip*; and *Pin's Fee Wife* is cruel in its very gentleness. These stories ought to appeal to all those who are interested in contemporary fiction, and in the art of the short story especially.

There are great differences between the stories in *Five for Silver* and the stories of Sylvia Townsend Warner. Whereas Mrs. Whitaker is apparently casual or artless, the author of *The Salutation* is very obviously an artist, deliberate and meticulous; Mrs. Whitaker's stories are sketchy and offhand, like Tchekoff's, but Miss Warner's work is polished and smooth, like that of David Garnett or George Moore.

A man might be forgiven for not detecting the consummate art of a story like *Something Funny*, but he would be dull-witted, indeed, not to detect that of the first story in Miss Warner's volume, *Some World Far From Ours*, though it is an inferior piece of work.

This is not only because Miss Warner is the more self-conscious artist, sensitively careful over the use of her words and the fine points even of her punctuation of them, but because her stories are told directly rather than by implication. She leaves less unsaid than Mrs. Whitaker, though by doing so she does not necessarily say more than she does. She is economical, as a writer of stories must be, but it is like the economy of one who is rich. It never goes to the limits of

BOOKS REVIEWED HERE

- Five for Silver.* By Malachi Whitaker. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
Frost in April. By Malachi Whitaker. (Travellers' Library. 3s. 6d.)
The Salutation. By Sylvia Townsend Warner. (Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.)
Crotty Shinkwin and The Beauty Spot. By A. E. Coppard. (Golden Cockerel Press. 21s.)
Modern Tales of Horror. By Various Authors. (Gollancz. 5s.)
The Heartless Land. By James Stern. (Macmillan. 7s. 6d.)