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ited by E. B. Osborn

NEW FICTION

"The Beggar's Opera" Brought Brilliantly To-Date

By H. E. BATES

A Penny for the Poor. By Bertolt Brecht. (Robert Hale, 7s. 6d.) Men Without Mercy. By Alfred Döblin. (Gollancz, 8s. 6d.) The Staff at Simpson's. By Frederick Niven. (Collins, 7s. 6d.) Perilous Sanctuary. By D. J. Hall. (Marrap, 7s. 6d.)

Many people will have seen, many more will have heard through the B.B.C. and gramophone records, the brilliant modern version of "The Beggar's Opera," written by the German poet, Bertolt Brecht, with music by Kurt Weill. It was a Berlin success before Hitler. It has been played also in London. It has been filmed; and now Herr Brecht has filled it out and rewritten it as a novel, a ruthless, vigorous satire on almost exactly the same rotten ramifications of human society as those Gay himself lashed so incisively. One of the many remarkable things about it is that Herr Brecht, at the time of writing the book, had never seen London. Yet his unsugared and undisguised repast, set in the time of the Boer War, has more than an air about it of the old London wickedness and dirt.

The plot of this book, laid almost entirely in the East End, is too complex to set down here; it is enough to say that it concerns in general the Peachum family and Macbeth and the extraordinarily involved and cunning net of corruption which they, with others, spread over the underworld of London: a world of sham beggars, honest rogues, pseudo-patriotic lice, indecent swindlers and indeed all kinds and conditions of human rascality. Scores of characters limp and hobble and shrink across this putrid scene; scores of rackets are worked; swindlers swindle each other; there is a factory for the manufacture of "maimed limbs"; and so on.

The Germs Seen Large

The thing to get clear is that this is not realism. It is an intentional exaggeration of realism. It is life seen through a microscope. And if we look carefully we shall see here the real rogues, the significant microbes, the true germs of human corruption which lie beneath the skin. It is not a pleasant picture, but it has truth, gusto and some sly brand of cynicism happily not lost in translation. If you wrote, in your youth, that honesty is the best policy, and believed it and still believe it, then there is waiting for you, in "Fanny's son Tom Peachum," a very rude awakening.

Also from the German, "Mev Wirmour Mancy," is in a very different mode. A long book, ponderous and thoroughly deliberate in the best German manner, it traces the history of a family, a mother, two sons and a daughter, who are left destitute and leave a farm in the country for the city. After the mother has tried without success to commit suicide, her eldest son gets odd jobs in the markets and meets Paul, a revolutionary, to whose opinions he is converted.

After becoming a thorough revolutionary, he becomes, in Book Two, a well-to-do manufacturer and, later, a man ruined by the economic crisis and accused of treason. All the time powerfully influenced by his mother. He meets death as a revolutionary and is praised, ironically, as a hero. To me the book is rather like a piano recital given by a man wearing three pairs of woolen gloves; everything is intensely sincere, ponderous, muffled, and sometimes more than a little dull.

Humour and Tolerance

Mr. Niven's story is set in late-Victorian and Edwardian Glasgow: scene, the warehouse and offices of Simpson's, manufacturers of soft-goods, flannel, wine, etc.; characters, the principals of the firm, the travellers, foremen, office-boys, &c.; background, social life of the times, world events, Boer rebellion, Boer War, &c. It is a story of a big business and little lives; the successful business-as-usual Simpson's, the obscure, almost anonymous life of the people in it. It is a book that owes something, I think, to Arnold Bennett. Its quiet shrewdness, its deft sketching-in of business life, its dry humour and much more would, at any rate, have been admired by Bennett. It is a very real, amusing section of Scottish life. It was Bennett who held that one of the novelist's greatest virtues was tolerance, and in "The Staff at Simpson's" he would have been delighted to find that virtue in full measure.

More and more novelists, it seems to me, write with an eye of Hollywood. This seems to be true of the author of "Perilous Sanctuary," who has given us a book with Hollywood splashed all over it. The scene is New Mexico, where a big Englishman, trying to escape arrest for murder, is sheltered by a Spanish landowner in an isolated village in the desert. He there comes across the most extraordinary sect of religious magicians and a real box-office Senorita who writes in a sort of superior blood-and-thunder manner, it belongs to the realm of "The Saturday Evening Post." The publishers claim the style to be "finished." But a style that can embrace, to name only the least of its faults, "Bowles," "laughed dirty," "snapped Bowles," "ejaculated Bowles," "A-bah-Ha! breathed Bowles," is a style that has not, for me at any rate, even begun.

A PLAIN MAN'S WAR

"And so the 2nd Leinsters passed from Belgium into Germany at exactly 1.48 p.m., the pipers playing 'Let Erin remember the days of old'..." That was the beginning of the end for Captain Hitchcock, whose diary of the War has just been published under the title "Strap To" (Hutchinson, 15s.).

Covering the years 1913 to 1918, the Armistice and the occupation, it is no work of art. It has no graces; but it has real value as a plain man's plain diary, becoming eloquent almost when events become particularly painful or particularly dramatic. Maps and sketch maps help to make the plain narrative plainer. Full of incident, this book tells us much of how trench warfare was fought, and of how it struck a man of average sensibility, or, if you like, insensibility. Captain Hitchcock's war is the ordinary man's war, not the neurotic's war, though it is not the less terrible for that. The final pages describing the march into Germany, and the occupation of Cologne are most painful, and fascinating to read.

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G. M LONGMAN

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Talleyrand, By Comte Translated from George Frédéric Le J. Stephens, with a the former. (Macn

The Lives of Talleyrand

For centuries to co rand to one of the ladies fided, "I should like the on as to what I have b thought, and what I i two books, either as goo both very good, suggest in the way of being full de Saint-Aulaire is i whom the Court of cherishes grateful mem called one of Talleyrand with profound knowle will he probe into the acter of his subject, A American scholar, who such authority on the but is even more searc Talleyrand's psychi philosophy. Between t and, as we shall see, di lar conclusions. Yet bot to confess themselves at that "facility," as Tall it, "of showing himsel maining impenetrable, but with all the app heartedness." The Prin had a heart, did not sleeve. * * *

Both biographers are so well that noble and their subject in its i Talleyrand (born in 17 nobleman and a Chi Eighteenth Century. scrupulous he could nerr "Save what you are al one of his maxims, "to is compelled to do so, a still make merit by it," the Comte d'Artois, aft persuade Louis XVI to tion, told Talleyrand t to-morrow," the Bishop "Well, then Monse remains for each of us it of his own interests, si Princes desert theirs at Monarchy."

Talleyrand thought of so well that noble and been, he became Foreg the Directory; he betra with such success th Foreign Minister under only organised the 18th "bought Government at Brumaire and sold it o was Bonapartist as long but he betrayed his m again in 1814. Napo dynasty owed more to to any other man, yet Helena that had he onl rand (and Fouché) he been upon his Throne. Talleyrand made hir the restoration that L certainly could not lin dispense with his servit for France at Vienna so Congress had to save F be true to Legitimacy, made the catchword of