NEW FICTION

The Wanderings of a Russian Jew

By H. E. BATES

Phineas Kahn. By Simon Blumenfeld. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)
All Hands. By H. M. Tomlinson. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
The Bird of Time. By George Albee. (Nelson. 7s. 6d.)
David of Judah. By Richard Blaker. (Nisbet. 8s. 6d.)

"PHINEAS KAHN" is the story of a Jewish immigrant, a longish novel, with a range of scene stretching from Russia to Vienna and Warsaw, to England and New York. It is Mr. Blumenfeld's second novel. Second novels are, I think, fairly reckoned as the acid test for novelists. First books are written, very often, with an assurance rarely recaptured, an enthusiastic and often unconscious art. Almost nine times out of ten they are also autobiographical. For that reason, perhaps, it is not surprising that present-day literature is strewn with the corpses of one-book novelists.

But a second novel is the test. How to temper enthusiasm with power? To write consciously and not unconsciously? Above all, to abandon the easy slip-down-the-stream-of-the-past method and create objectively? It is an obstacle which many writers never surmount.

"Always Convincing"

In "Phineas Kahn," however, Mr. Blumenfeld has surmounted it impressively. He has written here an assured, mature novel, broad and sympathetic in scope, fascinating, always convincing. His main character, Phineas Kahn, was born in Russia towards the end of the last century, in a small provincial town where poverty, hard toil, ignorance, corruption, and a mighty devotion to the creeds go hand-in-hand. Conscripted, Phineas joins the army (pay, half a farthing a day), wangles his way out of it, marries, and, already a considerable violinist, goes to Vienna and gets a living by playing gypsy airs in the cafés. Losing his job he goes to London, and one of Mr. Blumenfeld's best passages is the arrival of Phineas and Shandel, his young wife, at Liverpool-street in a black world of fog and rain. We are made to feel acutely and beautifully their helplessness, their small insect-like gropings in a world they never made, just as earlier we were made to feel the disgusting brutality of Tsarist Russia and just as, subsequently, we are made to feel the pain of their tragic struggle to live, with a growing family, out of the miserable wages of the tailoring sweat-shops of London and New York.

"Phineas Kahn," I need hardly say, has no plot. Character, the Jewish character, is its plot, and the book is steeped in all the rich strength of the race: its meanness and courage, its generosity and suspicion, its imagination and suffering, and not least its humour. Of Mr. Blumenfeld's first book I was glad to write: "The analysis of life strikes down to the heart." The same tribute is applicable to "Phineas Kahn"; but with this difference—that the life is broader, the analysis of it more mature, and the heart of it very much deeper.

The Failure of Mr. Tomlinson

"ALL HANDS" is a sea-story. For some years Mr. Tomlinson has been reckoned as a kind of minor Conrad. This is unfortunate, because, among other things, it *is* not true. There are passages in Mr. Tomlinson's work which might, doubtless, have been written by Conrad; but there are precious few passages in Conrad which might have been written by Mr. Tomlinson. Where Conrad was the supreme stylist, Mr. Tomlinson now seems to me to employ one of the worst styles in present-day literature. From being a writer (vide "Sea and the Jungle") of distinction, Mr. Tomlinson has deteriorated to the level of the following passage, typical of much in "All Hands":

"The sun had just set; that was all. In a last effort of day it had stored the heavens with the principle of light, as though to suffice the earth till it was that way again . . . the sky dulled swiftly to glowing copper, presaging a planet burning in a celestial war."

"Principle," "suffice," "Presaging" are the condemnatory words. Throughout "All Hands" Mr. Tomlinson reveals a similar partiality for the hackneyed and a corresponding reluctance to speak simply. This is also unfortunate, since he has what is really a plain tale to tell: the story of the s.s. Hestia, a freighter at the end of her career, and the people who sailed in her on what was almost her last voyage. She is an unlucky ship. Mr. Tomlinson spending pages and pages on hammering that into us; and this, on their voyage from London to Tripoli and Sicily and so to America, Dr. Tennant and his daughter Lyn find out; but they also find out of what stuff crews can be made. This gives Mr. Tomlinson his chance to make a story of courage and romance: a good story, if you can pardon the crudities already indicated.

San Francisco and the Earthquake

"THE BIRD OF TIME" belongs to that school of fiction which has a label tied round its neck in the form of a preface, saying "Authentic document: please believe." Such books are nearly always, for some reason, incredible. Mr. George Albee has no need of such a preface, though he has written it with all the seriousness of an American graduate offering a thesis. He writes well, even though at times unable to resist the very American temptation to dip his pen in the molasses (even in the best American literature beauty has a way of meaning treacle), and he writes, above all, with energy and efficiency. His scene is set in San Francisco, before, during, and after the earthquake, and his hero—really heroic—is a man who lives, right from his schooldays until his death in a strike-mob, a life of turbulent unorthodoxy, from sea-going to lion-taming, from crime to a spell at the university. Robert Limewright's story is told by his friend, Avery Gibson, and it makes, in many ways, a good novel: quick, written with punch as well as delicacy, never tough sometimes sugary, always compelling attention.

"DAVID OF JUDAH" is, as its title suggests, an essay in bettering the Bible. Such essays, as Sir James Barrie already knows, make very little appeal to the public taste, even when put over by the most powerful of theatrical combinations. What goes for the Barries goes for the Blakers. The authors of "The Boy David" and "David of Judah" would, it seems to me, be better employed catching tiddlers than in rehashing the glories of the Authorised Version for a public which, for once, reveals better sense than it is generally given credit for.

Does your boy, or your girl, want to write? Do you think he or she ought to write? Do you think they would write if some one showed them how to, or made them think it was fun? Then try "THE FUN OF WRITING" (Routledge, 5s.), in which Mr. S. P. B. Mais has collected those school radio talks of his, so sensible and simple. He entices his readers to everything from letter writing to running school magazines.