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Escape from a Victorian Household

By H. E. BATES

Pray Do Not Venture. By Joanna Cannan. (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.)
Act of God. By F. Tennyson Jesse. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
The Bridge. By Francis Stuart. (Collins. 7s. 6d.)
One of the Ones. By J. C. Snaith. (Mutchinson. 7s. 6d.)

MISS JOANNA CANNAN'S "PRAY DO NOT VENTURE" is a good novel. Fifty or sixty or seventy years ago it would have been a wicked novel. Indeed, a snorter, a jumping-cracker among the crinolines. Sermons would have been preached about it and young ladies, exhorted not to mention, let alone read, the history of its shameless heroine, would have slept with it under their pillows. Miss Cannan herself would have been bracketed with that terrible Mr. Currer Bell and banished from the drawing-rooms of the respectable. But times change. To-day the book is simply an entertaining piece of fiction and Miss Cannan will be lucky if her book is banned from any household this side of Ireland.

I mention these things because Miss Cannan's story is set in those early Victorian times when books caused heart burnings and young ladies (a very few young ladies) sought to emulate the dashing doings of Geraldine Jewsbury. Her heroine, Harriet Unwin, is just one of those impetuous creatures, and in the correct, cast-iron household in the Lake District (Miss and Mr. Wordsworth are still there) life is torture. She longs to escape, rejects the copy-book proposals of her girlhood friend, and, finally, true to type, marries a dark suitor, and goes to live in London. In London she bears a child which dies, and then finds that her husband is tired of her. Her first lover turns up again, and, impetuous as ever, she then lets off that immoral firework which in its own time, would have been a scorcher. She runs away to Australia with him, posing as his wife. The man, David, never really gets over this, and, as soon as he hears of a legacy of £15,000, turns tail for England. Harriet, impetuous, strong-willed, courageous, and by the standards of her time indeed, runs away again with another man, to do her part in the establishment of the Commonwealth. Miss Cannan tells her story in clear, adequate prose, without any nonsensical frillings. Harriet is a fiery, lovable creature, and all the diverse scenes, the Lake District, London, the voyage to Australia, and the life in Australia, are extraordinarily well done. In short, as I say, a good novel. Strange to think that once, not long since, it might have been burnt by Bishops.

Modern Miracle

"Act of God," would also have claimed, and still should, ecclesiastical attention. In Fraxinet, a small Mediterranean port, there happens one of those modern miracles which from time to time shake and perplex the world of Rome. A woman in a blue veil lined with yellow and a pearl crown set rather far back on her head appears mysteriously to two children, talks to them in pure French, changes to Provençal when they do not understand it well, and mysteriously disappears. It becomes plain to the people, and especially to a curé named Cabadeus, that the children have seen no other than the Mother of God herself. The effects of this miracle are publicly tremendous ("Haut Fraxinet water sent without profit to England for 36 francs"), but they are especially great in the mind of Cabadeus. It would be unfair to detail the rest of this story, except to say that the miracle is subsequently discovered to have been a deliberate hoax of an Englishwoman, the cousin of a close friend of Cabadeus himself. That leads to tragedy. Miss Tennyson Jesse has realised to the fullest extent the possibilities of this situation, treats it with erudition, calm, delicacy and not least wit, and gives us a novel which, in the hot rush of modern fiction, is as cool as a church on a hot day.

Not Too Shocking

Just as Miss Cannan's novel would have shocked the England of yesterday, so, I suppose, Mr. Stuart's novel will shock the Ireland of to-day. It does not shock me, but then I am past being shocked, in the world of novels, by anything. This is perhaps why the central situation of Mr. Stuart's novel and his treatment of it seem to me a little ordinary. In the small town of Fert, on the Irish coast, Joanna Flynn is married to a dull, middle-aged garage proprietor. As a respectable woman, she is asked by a body of other respectable women to go and remonstrate with a girl named Orla O'Diagon, an unloved creature who is supposed to be carrying on with men. In doing this, she herself becomes entangled in a passionate affair with the town engineer, Larry Byrne, who is himself involved in some illicit activity in a derelict ship lying along the quayside. Somehow I cannot believe that respectable women nowadays, even in Ireland, send respectable envoys to remonstrate with wayward girls, though I am ready to believe it. The point is that Mr. Stuart does not make me believe it. He writes, for an Irishman especially, an extraordinary prosaic, almost hum-drum style, and as compared with his contemporaries, Mr. Frank O'Connor, Mr. Sean O'Faolain and Mr. O'Flaherty for instance, he lacks distinction, and, above all, conviction. If you should happen to be a school-teacher, then the late J. C. Snaith's "ONE OF THE ONES" ought to be as good as a text-book. For here, in this romantic comedy of a Cockney char who comes into a fortune and goes to live in a mansion, you may show successive generations of youth the art of how not to write their native tongue. This book must be, I think, a compilation of all the known clichés in the language, and is in that sense, quite apart from others, an entertaining book.

"GREENHOUSE CULTURE FOR AMATEURS," by Edith Grey Wheelwright, is an admirable little introduction to a big subject, well worth its 5s. (Country Life). The author advises on the type of greenhouse—how neat and decent the new steel-frame houses look beside the old-fashioned wooden houses—and has something to say on the cost. In the main, she deals with plants for growing without heat, from chrysanthemums to cacti. There are 18 photographs. Another good gardening book is Mr. W. E. Siewell's "COOPER'S 'THE VEGETABLE GARDEN'" (English Universities Press, 5s.), thorough, concise, with information on most things from how to make a concrete path to how long various seeds will live. The photographs and drawings are very useful, and as gardening editor in the Northern Region of the B.B.C., the author needs no introduction.

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