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SEÁN O'FAOLÁIN

THE novel-reading public is like some fabulous monster of gargantuan appetite. It must be fed and fed, and apparently for ever fed, and novels mean less to it than buns to children at a bun-fight. One novel is very like another, it seems: just as one bun is very like another. Plum buns are scarce. But the public is not particular, and it demands only that its novels, like its buns, should be hot and fresh, and to recommend to it a novel published six weeks or more ago would seem to be an outrageous thing.

Fortunately there is a point at which novels cease to resemble buns, and I have included in this article one or two books which, though published as long ago as two months, have not grown stale. One at least has not grown stale in 50 years. I have a conviction that one of the others will endure, too.

There is something uncanny about the English written by Irishmen. Mr. O'Faoláin and Mr. Clarke write with a smooth and inevitable flow of words that one does not often meet with in English writers. Both are poets to the core. Mr. Clarke, a romanticist, who has written a kind of mischievous legend of ancient Ireland; Mr. O'Faoláin, a poetical realist and a revolutionary, who has written a book of stories which Mr. Edward Garnett in his preface describes as some of the best that ever came out of Ireland in his time. Underneath its gay and apparently innocuous romance, "The Bright Temptation" is really a satire on the priesthood of Ireland; it satirises by ridicule and not by invective, by mischievous laughter rather than by scorn; but there is no mistaking its object.

A young scholar, Aidan, loses himself, cannot find his way back to his monastery, swims a river, and finds himself without clothes in the world. He goes forth, naked, to meet the trials and temptations of the world he does not know, the world of passion and freedom, eternal beauty and eternal love, meeting with adventure after adventure, moving against a background of landscape which Mr. Clarke has sketched in beautifully. It is all delicious. The wit, the romance, the satire, the poetry of the book are combined with a rare art.

Mr. O'Faoláin's volume is made up of seven stories, of which the title piece is the longest and most beautiful. In the strength of its atmosphere, its contrasts in mood and character, its light and shade, this story of the old Irish aristocrat and the young revolutionary without taste and tradition, both in love, with a young peasant girl is a most memorable piece of work, powerful but

delicate, poetically rich but never luscious, its values pure and genuine.

Next to it I rank "The Small Lady," where contrast—the contrast of the adolescent boy and the mature Small Lady herself, of the drunkard and the ascetic priest—gives the work great beauty and power and balance. All through Mr. O'Faoláin's work one finds this perfect sense of balance and contrast—beauty and ugliness, light and shade, sound and silence, youth and maturity, cynicism and wonder. Mr. O'Faoláin's prose has always a rhythmic, intense, urgent flow; his sentences are like long and sustained cadences. On his own confession he is a child of strange parents—Tchekov and George Moore, but like Katherine Mansfield, who is said to have derived from Tchekov and Virginia Woolf, he has qualities which belong to neither. His work springs from the deepest poetical impulses, giving it burning originality. Also his book has been banned from his own country—another recommendation, perhaps, of its force and richness?

It is astonishing that "Dominique" has never until now been translated into English. For fifty years it has been a classic in France—a minor classic certainly, but of its beauty and sincerity there can be no doubt. Though absolutely French in feeling and spirit it recalls the work of Turgenev in its delicacy and tenderness, its quickness and depth, its clarity and colour, and above all perhaps in its feeling for the country. Fromentin, a painter by profession, never wrote another novel, but the story of "Dominique," the story of frustrated love, is eternal. Of the translation it is difficult to speak without superlatives; the feeling of Miss Longman's work is exquisite. There are passages so fine in both form and effect that they do not read like translation at all. Her work is classical.

"Royal Flush" is called a novel and will be read as a novel, though I have seen it referred to as "an imaginative interpretation of history," a term which might also be applied to Lytton Strachey's biographies. It is certainly not a historical novel of the old school. In style and psychology it is modern—the style pictorial rather than discursive, the analysis of character sharp and acute rather than verbosely interpretive. It contains so many characters that Miss Irwin has wisely drawn up a genealogical tree, but they are never confused or boring, and, above all, they never strike one as being mere ghosts of historical figures speaking in the jargon of fifth-rate costume plays. Miss Irwin has had the sense to make "Minette" and the crowd of characters about her talk as though they lived today, and she has given her book life by doing so.

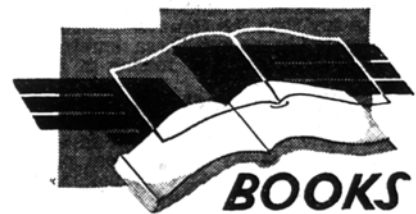
Mr. Moore has chosen a risky title for his novel—risky, because the book is very likely to be taken on sight as a thesis on the English comic drama or the humour of Fielding and Dickens. It is, however, a novel—a modern comedy, written rather in the early Wells manner, with typically Wellsian minor characters and with a dim, dusty little office clerk, whom Wells would have loved, as a hero. This fellow, John Senlac, having been left a small fortune by an aunt, decides to get himself the sack, and does so by turning into blank verse "a very long and uninteresting lease which the hateful Mr. Dockitt had given him to copy." He leaves his horrid

office and goes adventuring, meeting on his way those typically English comic types which have no doubt inspired Mr. Moore's title. Of these I like Mrs. Anson, his landlady, for whom the word "sin" had only one meaning—"she read her Sunday paper from front page to back each week"—and Mr. Crosley, the publican, to whom "quite ordinary misfortunes seemed funny."

"English Comedy" certainly fulfils the promise of its title, and I should like to recommend it warmly.

Except, perhaps, Mrs. C. A. Dawson Scott and Mr. Ernest Rhys, probably no one in England reads as many short stories or has done so much for the modern short story as Mr. O'Brien. Since 1915 he has been publishing yearly volumes of both English and American work, much of which has since become famous, and he has now collected a volume of representative American tales from 1915 to 1930. The volume contains some of the finest modern American work, such as Hemmingway's "The Undeclared," Sherwood Anderson's "I'm a Fool," Elizabeth Madox Roberts' "On the Mountain Side," but it also contains much that, like Woolworth's jewellery, looks good but is really cheap. In America the artistic short-story has had to fight hard for recognition, and in despair young American authors have started group-magazines in which to publish their unwanted work. Many of those "authors" Mr. O'Brien does not represent, with the result that, though his volume is full of famous names, it remains unrepresentative of the truly native American short-story, devoid of all sham European influences, which has grown up during the last three or four years.

I have included Mr. Nichols's book here, not because it is a novel, but because it is more witty and entertaining than many novels, and because the oddest and most unlikely people will turn out to be gardeners. "Down the Garden Path" shows Mr. Nichols as not only the enthusiastic gardener but the shrewd and witty observer of those gardening friends that every gardener has. The book ranks with that other amusing gardener's comedy, "The Gardener's Year," by the brothers Capek. Mr. Nichols has seen the funny side of gardeners. It takes a good gardener to do that.



Reviewed On This Page

THE BRIGHT TEMPTATION. By Austin Clarke (Allen and Unwin. 7/6 net).

MIDSUMMER NIGHT MADNESS. By Seán O'Faoláin. With a preface by Edward Garnett (Cape. 7/6 net).

DOMINIQUE. By Eugene Fromentin. Translated by V. I. Longman (Howe. 7/6).

ROYAL FLUSH. By Margaret Irwin (Chatto and Windus. 8/6).

ENGLISH COMEDY. By John C. Moore (Dent. 7/6).

MODERN AMERICAN SHORT STORIES. Edited by E. J. O'Brien (Cape. 7/6).

DOWN THE GARDEN PATH. By Beverley Nichols (Cape. 7/6).