

NEW FICTION

BY L. P. HARTLEY

Destinies. By François Mauriac. Secker. 7s. 6d.*Catherine Foster.* By H. E. Bates. Cape. 7s. 6d.*Women Are Like That.* By E. M. Delafield. Macmillan. 7s. 6d.*Awake and Rehearse.* By Louis Bromfield. Cape. 7s. 6d.

THE sense of sin, so prevalent in some Victorian novels, in modern fiction is not much met with. The tendency of psychology has been more and more to limit the field of personal responsibility and to attribute aberrations of conduct to influences over which the individual has no control. In philosophy, too, the same movement is observable; and philosophical novelists like Hardy are never tired of emphasizing the helplessness of man to escape his destiny and to direct his own life. These views, though not confined to the pages of books, have not yet found common acceptance; and ordinary conversation retains in greater or less degree the habit of censoriousness. In discussing our acquaintance we select this action for praise, that for blame, without stopping to think that, if the person in question is not a free agent, to canvass his behaviour in terms of right or wrong is an impertinence and a proof of ignorance in ourselves.

Prejudice, however, dies hard and impartiality is found more readily among novelists than men in the street. It is doubtful whether, even among the most enlightened, the effect of an action will ever be proportionate to the causes which dictated it: if someone treads on my toe the pain makes me immediately angry and it is only later that I realize that the offender may have had an inherited habit of clumsiness, or may simply have been pushed by somebody else. And so in more important matters: the emotions will always interpret as pleasant or painful experiences which the intellect, left to itself, would call interesting or dull; until a point is reached in which the sum of a life's happiness seems bound up in some trivial affair and the mind, goaded by the emotions, calls in Heaven and Hell and all the resources of theology to explain or justify its pain.

M. Mauriac is a Roman Catholic and has an acute consciousness of sin. Unlike the Russians, he does not believe that there is some saving virtue in being desperately wicked; he lacks this consolation, and the sins committed by his characters remain to the end nasty and brutish and a source of sorrow; they do not illuminate the soul with divine flashes. In his books the sins are plain and the part played by religion in reconciling them with the order of the universe is obscure. The characters try to repent, but there is nothing exhilarating about their repentance. M. Mauriac puts forward his mysticism tentatively, but the sense of its presence is always there, giving his work a satisfying quality and blunting the edge of its improbabilities. 'Destinies' tells how an engagement was broken off by a third person, who revealed to the girl scandalous facts about her fiancé's past life. M. Mauriac analyses with great care the emotions experienced by Pierre in making the exposure—they are not attractive, a disagreeable blend of self-righteousness and self-abasement. Yet M. Mauriac seems to believe that though the instrument was unworthy, the impulse was right and redounded to the glory of God; and that the instinct of Pierre's mother, in falling in love with the sinner, though full of human beauty, was wrong, an emotional weed to be uprooted by the aid of religious exercises. As I said, the story is not as convincing as the emotions which accompany it, and these at times have a spurious air, as though founded on religiosity rather than on religion. It seems improb-

able that Elizabeth would have suffered so deeply from Bob's death; but had she suffered, her sorrow would surely have taken the form M. Mauriac gives it. It is his distinction, which he shares with few contemporary novelists, to be able to depict self-sacrificing acts and emotions, renunciation, self-restraint, self-immolation, without making them seem ridiculous or sterile.

'Catherine Foster' is a story about love; it has virtually no other theme. Mr. Bates had already exhibited in 'The Two Sisters' a powerful imagination capable of unifying, in a remarkable degree, the diverse facts of experience. With this imagination went an immaturity of outlook and an awkwardness of style which one hoped the author would outgrow; but he has not. And he has lost certain qualities. The vaguely indicated background of the earlier novel was full of mystery and beauty. It was a pleasure to find a writer regarding the Midlands of England with a poet's eye. In 'Catherine Foster' the setting is sharper and more distinct, but less effective. Drawn more closely from life, it shows up the author's weak grasp of external facts. And the love of Catherine for her husband's brother also receives more realistic treatment; it is passionate and sensual, not passionate and romantic. And the awkwardness of style, which occasionally achieves happy effects through its own clumsiness, persists. As against this it must be admitted that 'Catherine Foster' has the sincerity and force of the earlier book, and the same power of depicting a human being possessed by love.

'Women Are Like That' and 'Awake and Rehearse' have an international interest. Miss Delafield and Mr. Louis Bromfield have both written collections of short stories: both write in that mood of up-to-date knowingness which is all the wear among some of the best short-story writers to-day:

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