

NEW FICTION

BY L. P. HARTLEY

Seven Tales and Alexander. By H. E. Bates.
The Scholartis Press. 7s. 6d.

Fugitive's Return. By Susan Glaspell. Gollancz.
7s. 6d.

Five and Ten. By Fanny Hurst. Cape. 7s. 6d.
Dido. By Gertrude Atherton. Chapman and
Hall. 7s. 6d.

MR. H. E. BATES has a charming talent—personal, sensitive, imaginative and sincere. He has already written three books: two novels and a volume of very short stories. The novels were powerful and, though they displayed the qualities of his imagination, the grandiosity of their conception tended to swamp it. His creative gift is interpretative and sympathetic rather than formative, so sensitive to the contours of life that it flows round instead of boring through them. He has no ready-made mould into which to pour his ideas; they clothe themselves in language in haphazard fashion; so that even now his writing shows traces of immaturity and amateurishness. But this is a defect of his quality; he never forces his note, never tries to eke out his own inspiration by borrowing from other people's. He does not, like some writers, grow slightly rhetorical when he has nothing special to say: the expression is as flat as the thought that prompted it.

He is especially successful in portraying the minds of children, for his own mind is still coloured by wonder and clouded by an incomplete apprehension of the forms of things. All the adventures that befall the little boy during his country ride with his uncle are touched with magic; they are realized intensely but partially, after the manner of childhood. Mr. Bates could not have chosen a theme (if theme, having so little structure and organization, it can properly be called) better suited to his talents. When later he tries his hand at fantasy and fairy-story more conventionally conceived, he is less successful. In 'The Peach-Tree' the borrowings from 'Goblin Market' are too obvious, and the fable in 'The King Who Lived on Air' is too grotesque to please the child it is Mr. Bates's purpose to evoke in the reader. But the ironical story, 'A Comic Actor,' succeeds perfectly, while 'Lanko's White Mare' is almost unbearably moving. Hostile critics of Mr. Bates's work could pick out flaws in plenty; the lack of snap, the untidy ends, the shambling, desultory gait, the awkwardnesses and lapses in the style:

Soon everywhere was under a warm stillness; all the mist dispersed stealthily and silently, without wind, and the trees seemed to stoop with an invisible burden of heavy airs and the overbearing loveliness of the ripening years.

Clearly, "overbearing" is not here the *mot juste*. Mr. Bates's English has a kind of slouching charm, though there are times when the charm is less in evidence than the slouch. But his mind is fresh and fragrant, and embraces in its gentle, clumsy hold a wide variety of experience.

After these melting accents 'Fugitive's Return' seems unbearably strident, over-written, over-manipulated, from every point of view excessive. Miss Glaspell has written novels that have been widely admired, and in this one she certainly shows herself mistress of her craft; its tyrant, rather, for she is altogether too sure of herself. The story tells how an American woman, temperamentally expecting too much from life, is cruelly treated by Fate, and brought to the verge of suicide. She goes to Greece,

to Delphi, and there, by instituting herself the good angel of the countryside, by ministering to the needs and contributing to the comforts of her poorer neighbours, she tries to rebuild the edifice of her emotions, shattered by her husband's desertion and her child's death. A noble theme; but Miss Glaspell makes it distasteful by her manner of handling it. She admits that other women have suffered before Irma; but she writes as though no one had, and Irma herself thinks, speaks, and acts as if no one had. She has so many modes of self-pity at her command that for the reader to offer sympathy seems otiose. She is always asking rhetorical questions, sometimes of anyone who comes to hand, sometimes of nobody in particular, the Universe perhaps. She mentioned her dead daughter to a friend, then

She started away, but suddenly she turned, turning upon him, clutching his arms. "Where now are her little curls—her blue eyes—her hands—her feet? Where now is her little brown slim straight body that grew—grew—"

"Listen to my tale of woe," one would like to interpolate.

Here is another of her questionnaires:

Was this a dream? [she asked herself.] Such dreams as follow death? This place in which she sat—how could she be sitting here, alone in a theatre centuries old? That could not be—not really be. What is life? What is death? What is death? What is dream? What is real? Was it perhaps all one? Do there only seem to be differences?

She would like a sign . . . She wanted to know who and where she was. And why? Why?

These metaphysical speculations seem to have bred in Irma a self-conceit commensurate with her self-pity. She feels not only superior to others in grief, but their equal in intellect. She would "carry her own fresh grief, as one carries an offering" into "those structures of noble thinking" (Greek Literature):

humbly, and asking help, but saying, with authority: You have seen. This is true. And so it was as if together they found truth—she and Plato; herself with Æschylus.

With Æschylus let us leave her.

'Five and Ten' differs little from many other novels written on the same theme: how to be moderately happy though fabulously rich. Miss Hurst's millionaire takes life seriously, his wife accepts it, his daughter plays with it, his son rejects it. The question of happiness is not solved although possible solutions are indicated—e.g., fostering the drama, and giving the money back to those from whom it came. The book abounds in a sense of activity and hurry, of social ambitions ardently prosecuted, of luxuries denied and granted, of rapid, entertaining small talk. It is vigorous in a febrile way; but it would be more effective if the author did not identify herself with her characters. She is as restless as they: in the whole book there is no solid ground, no stationary point from which to observe the actors and the patterns they weave in their frenzied search for emotional satisfaction. Wanting a standard of comparison, everything seems meaningless and unreal, and one loses the sense of the relative importance of events. It is a strange world, in which so much that seems desirable goes begging, and in which so many vehement desires can find no object worth their constancy.

In Tyre and Carthage it was different. Desire and the objects of desire were properly correlated. As Mrs. Atherton portrays them, the people of the ancient world were simpler than we are; everyone had an end in view and was expected to pursue it, at whatever cost to his neighbours. Emotions flared up quickly and as quickly died. Mrs. Atherton's account