# GEORGE GISSING'S STORIES

## Reviews by H. E. BATES

TO my generation the name of **George Gissing** means next to nothing. It should mean a great deal. In Gissing, though the best of the stories in **Stories and Sketches** (Michael Joseph, 7s. 6d.) creak a little under the corsetry of Victorian tradition, it is possible to see the germ of the modern short story. Gissing is very much to the present-day short story in England what Bierce is to the short story in America. In declining to base his stories on plots that were in turn based on a system of fictional geometry, Gissing was a

pioneer. He was all for character. One story included here, *A Calamity at Tooting*, is a very average story, but it is significant in revealing Gissing's interest in undertones, in the subtle and quiet machinery of everyday lives. From such lives Gissing could extract humour and tragedy and contrive moments of brief emotional explosion. His trouble was not that he was a bad writer—far from it—but that he was a good writer born a quarter of a century too soon. To-day Gissing would have been quite happy. In his lifetime, as this volume shows, he never reached full development. The texture of most of these stories is green and unripe. They, and Gissing, needed the sun of another age to develop them to perfection. For all that this final volume of his stories and sketches is very interesting: the work of a man who, potentially at least, was well on towards being a master.

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It is fifteen years since, as a school-boy, I read and admired the novels of **Miss Sheila Kaye Smith.** Now, reading **Faithful Stranger** (Cassell, 7s. 6d.), I know that it will never do to go back and re-read the books that once impressed a boy so much by their colour, skill, and honesty. Something has changed somewhere, and these fourteen stories, though still coloured, skilful, and honest, are no longer the work of an impressive writer. Why? To a maturer eye they seem honest but woolly, coloured but conventional, skilful but skilful more in gathering up the loose threads of plots than in opening up new glimpses into life and character. The language is ordinary—might too often have been written by anybody; the thought behind it trivial. Here reappears Joanna Godden—washed-out image of the woman who, to a school-boy, inflamed a terrific book. The rest of the stories are, I fear, on a par.

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No present-day writer, with the possible exception of James Joyce, has been less understood than **Mr. T. F. Powys.** His long-short story, **Goat Green** (Golden Cockerel Press, 8s. 6d.), is typical of his sly, grave, allegorical and (because allegorical) much misunderstood style. Its grave, oblique use of an English which belongs more to the eighteenth century than to to-day is often delicious, often dull, often baffling. There is something of the mystic about this descendent of Cowper the poet: a man using the earthly stories of Dorset villagers to point a heavenly and often hidden meaning. *Goat Green* is technically a Powys masterpiece. I wish I could say as much for the illustrations.