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ed by E. B. Osborn

NEW FICTION

Richard Aldington's Bitter Medicine

By H. E. BATES

Very Heavens. By Richard Aldington. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)
Cuckoo Narrow. By T. Thompson. (Allen and Unwin. 7s. 6d.)
The Dance Goes On. By Louis Golding. (Rich and Cowan. 7s. 6d.)
No Green Pastures. By Jean Barclay Low. (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.)

Mr. Aldington's novel is like a pill-sweet-coated with the nicest of titles, but really made up from some complicated prescription of anger, contempt, pity and satire. It is not at all a medicine for the faint of heart. For many it will be a stiff, horrific draught: a sort of kill or cure, poison or purge book. For myself, I took it at one gulp, found it most stimulating and suffered no ill effects. In a world of much novelistic trash, it strikes me as being a very salutary and in many ways moving book of the first class.

It begins rather poorly. Chris Heylin, an undergraduate, forced to go down for financial reasons, says "Good-bye" to his fatuous tutor and goes home to his family, and a pretty terrible family it is. His father is a whisky-ridden invalid; his mother a social snob; his sister is about to be married to a title she does not love, and the whole crew are bankrupt. It is the sort of family, in fact, at which Mr. Aldington has long delighted to take a crack. But his crack here strikes me as being rather cheap, overdone, and a little too smartly undergraduate itself. However, the family portraits develop quite well, and the book, after 50 pages or so, begins to move with real strength. Mr. Aldington's hero (when are we going to coin some fitting label for this so often unheroic figure?) is a man who accepts no conventions or convictions but his own; his tongue is scathingly logical and savagely perverse; he has "power to hurt," and in contradiction to the rest of that line, he does hurt, and he hurts women most.

A Terrible Situation

He pursues a wretched and difficult course, wounding his lovers, alienating his family (who deserve it, anyway), losing his job to an eccentric millionaire collector. Finally, he is involved in a situation which does Mr. Aldington the utmost credit as a novelist. His sister returns, broken up, from her baronet husband, to tell him of the most ghastly physical results of her marriage. Those who remember Ibsen's "Ghosts" will need no elucidation of this point. It is a terrible and moving situation, and the passages describing it could have been tackled and written only by a novelist of the first class. For me most novels are too long; "Very Heavens," on the other hand, seems to me too short. Not simply because I enjoyed it, but for artistic reasons. The book, in a sense, seems stunted, and I feel that another 50 pages would have still further improved this most individually ironic, salutary book.

Now I take off my hat to Mr. T. Thompson. His "Cuckoo Narrow" contains more authentic, honest stuff to the square inch than a whole haystack of Bloomsbury masterpieces. This book is as indigenous to Lancashire as hot-pot, clog-dance, chapel tea, and Preston North End. Its sturdy, shrewd-spoken characters live in the kitchen, keep the Bible under the front-room aspidistra, shop at the Co-op, have their presence on the next door neighbour's whippet, say what they mean and say it well, and are, in more respects than one, something very near the salt of the earth. In the whole of this story of Joe Bower and his misuses and their two daughters and the people of Cuckoo Narrow I cannot detect the echo of a false note, and I am willing to lay three to one that there is, in spite of its tragedy, a laugh on every page.

Regional speech has not often been more vigorously or faithfully recorded in the novel of to-day than it is here. Mr. Thompson has not only listened to the speech of his people but he has eaten and drunk it and, above all, spoken it himself. In contrast to that fashionable lady novelist whose butler announced: "Madame is out; Madame is dining at Lyons" to-night in order to see how the poor eat," Mr. Thompson has the eating, drinking, sleeping, hoping, speaking, and, in fact, the whole life of these people in his blood. His book is, perhaps inevitably, limited in scope, but it is by no means limited in appeal, and of its kind there is nothing better being done in England to-day.

Mr. Louis Golding

If Mr. Golding had half Mr. Thompson's affinity with his subject and a drachm or two of Mr. Aldington's technical competence and fire, he might be an interesting novelist. As it is, he strikes me as being a stock size novelist. He once produced an outside novel, "Magnolia Street," which a great many people worked hard to pretend was a great novel. Now he has learned economy, with the result that "The Dance Goes On" is a better novel than his big success. This is not, in my opinion, saying much but it is saying something. If I could do more to praise this story of the sweet little Russian dancer and her hair-tearing tutor and her doctor lover, I would do it. But if you shake this book too hard the sandvich falls out. Of its characters, the adored Mironova, the ballet-dancer for whom "men would have thrust nails into their bodies" (the notion would have given the tactician Joe Bower a pink fill) is nearest to life and the scenes of pre-war and revolutionary Russia are easily and neatly sketched, and with fair conviction.

Last, but not at all least, a volume of short stories. In Mrs. Low's "No Green Pastures" the lives of a group of Central European peasants are recorded with rare veracity and liveliness, in a style that is strong and distinguished without being at all purple or overdone. This world of peasant greed and lust and simplicity and passion and hard toil seems extraordinarily far removed from a Europe of treaties and pacts and political unrest. Here the emphasis is on the fundamental, primitive urges of man, birth, death, love, hunger, hate; the dramas are raw and ruthless, and are played out between protagonists half worn out by such bitter contact with earth that it is said of a woman "she was an old woman of thirty," and of a man "emaciated and old, he was twenty-five." This is a land that popular fancy peoples mainly with gypsy orchestras. Read Mrs. Low and see the she gets under the skin of an almost fabulous life.

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