

BOOKS OF THE WEEK

NEW NOVELS

THE FLYING GOAT. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 7s. 6d.

THE SEA TOWER. By HUGH WALPOLE. Macmillan. 7s. 6d.

FRANCE BY APPOINTMENT. By G. E. TREVELYAN. Harp. 7s. 6d.

PAY THY PLEASURE. By ELISABETH ENGLISH-JONES. Faber and Faber. 7s. 6d.

The transition from normal life to the abnormal life of war makes one, for the moment at least, curiously responsive to experience. One is alert for sounds; one looks at the most ordinary objects as though expecting to see in them, too, some recognition of change; at night the novel sky is almost an entity, variable, alternately reassuring or ominous. Nor is this sensitiveness limited to the external. Conscience is uncommonly knowing and will allow no subtrefuges. One is aware for the first time of certain unthought-of hesitations, mental provisos, the cold daylight in which one's pretences must appear to those who know one well. This is worth mentioning because to enter the world of Mr. H. E. Bates's stories is merely to pass into an extension of this region of unnatural clarity. There is the same thin, motionless atmosphere from which shadows are absent and in which everything stands out exactly as it is.

Yet it is not a dead atmosphere. The imagination that has inspired the stories of *The Flying Goat* is not remote or cold. The humour, indignation, or sympathy with which some of them were written is only enhanced by the austerity of the expression; and the level of accomplishment still allows an extraordinary variety of mood. At the one extreme is "I Am Not Misled," and at the other the farcical and fantastic "A Funny Thing" (another of the Uncle Silas episodes). The first is a story of insanity in a young girl, and in this piece there is no sort of barrier between the reader and the characters. He hears the silences in this grave, unnatural circle, feels the visitor's spontaneous love for the girl who seems only to be living on two planes, notices with him the change in the eyes, the change from presence to absence, and experiences the same unreasoning necessity for flight. "Perhaps We Shall Meet Again," which records a chance conversation between a starving girl and a woman who wants to get thin, and "The Late Public Figure," which discovers the truth about him, are more obvious, but both of them are forceful and both contain many instances of the extraordinarily quick eye for personal idiosyncrasies for which the author is famous. "The Ox" is a shorter, compressed version of Miss Fanny Harsart's "Lammox." "The Flying Goat" itself has the cheerful absurdity of a true nonsense story, and "Shot, Actress—Full Story" gives an excellent example of the obtuseness and ruthlessness of gossip. None of the rest is poor, but one remembers with particular pleasure "The Ship," in which a sailor comes home with a coloured bride.

A MAD MOTHER-IN-LAW

By comparison with this stillness and austerity, *The Sea Tower* has more than its natural violence. Sir Hugh Walpole's energy blows through the book like a strong, sunny wind, delighting in its own strength, and the drama is almost as fanciful and improbable as that in his "Portrait of a Man with Red Hair." The book is a creation, in the precise meaning of the word, and owes nothing to life, but the author's admirers will understand that this hardly detracts from the entertainment. Imagine, then, a wind-swept house on one of those Southern English shores that the author excels in adapting to his frankly theatrical purposes. It is an ugly, uncomfortable house, the property of an ever-loving mother whose affection for her sons has become a mania. The obverse of this affection is naturally hostility to those who dispute it, and here the heart of this hostility is borne by a young and beautiful daughter-in-law. Her husband, who is a pleasant and stupid young man, is devoted to his mother, and for a long time cannot be brought to see the actual physical danger that is preparing for the girl. After people have talked about themselves for some time, the danger materializes. There is a night attack with a red-hot poker, and—with one of those strokes that save a born novelist from his most risky situations—the familiar comedy drama is all at once changed into a touching and not inhuman scene of weakness and defeat.

THE FORTUNE-TELLER

Rather closer to life is Miss G. E. Trevelyan's *France by Appointment*. Jean is the child of a working-class family, and we see her passage from a childhood with uncommon and innocent visions to marriage with an antiologist who gradually corrupts her powers. Fortune-tellers are inclined to be reticent about their business, and we must take Miss Trevelyan's word for her material. But the style makes this as easy as possible. There is a convincing representation of an ingenious and unretorted mind, and the girl's transition from a half-fearful, half-grateful acceptance of her gift to doubt of its genuineness is made slowly and subtly. One is fully persuaded of her distress as she begins to suspect her "control" and finally surrenders the struggle against fraud.

*Pay Thy Pleasure* is much more curious. Once again there is the fortune-telling motive, for the clumsy, disfigured, middle-aged woman whose father's death at last gives her her own life has always depended on this comfortable counsel. Even before she moves to Wales, she sees in the cards, or fancies she sees, the eventual appearance of a lover who will not be repelled by the scars on her face. Fortunately, the cards are not precise, and she is unable to see the kind of man he turns out to be, for Lewis Gower is the incarnate cad who was one of the stand-bys of Victorian fiction. Most of it, in fact, is a survival from that fiction. Where else would one find the oaths, the dreadfully hearty manner, the unfavourable investment of the mistress's money, the conventional ways of speech for different classes, and so on? Yet in its early passages the book is better than this. The canvassing of recollections in Miss Giring's former home promises something more subtle and more serious. But such carelessness as eveyzoedisplay later on is disillusioning. This is an age in which people have to be hard-headed to survive, and the fictions of the deluded mistress, the singularly stupid lover—for lovers of this kind must now be crazy—and the girl sold blindly into marriage are altogether too transparent.

J. S.