

# HALF-HOURS OF LEISURE

by PHOEBE ASHBURNER

Volumes of short stories also have their place in our literature, and the collections here reviewed have such variety of manner and matter that all readers, whatever their tastes, should find something to please them. H. E. Bates is such an expert writer that the reader is compelled to continue, having once read the opening sentence. Phyllis Bentley makes the mistake of using cliché and mock facetiousness. The third collection is an anthology of stories about countries of which the authors are not natives.

WE too often hear from publishers and librarians that volumes of short stories are unpopular. Yet in this urgent time-tabled age when we grumble at having so little leisure for reading, the short story is surely an ideal form—the right length for a tube journey or a visit to the launderette.

## Poetic Writer

Specially delightful for reading-at-a-sitting is the long-short-story or *nouvelle*, a form accepted in France but rare in England. H. E. Bates' new book, *Death of a Huntsman*, consists of four longish stories, each demonstrating his practised artistry. How surely and economically he leads in, so that in the opening sentence one is already caught into the mood, and must continue reading; such impact is a mark of the expert writer. Expert, and poetic too, is the use of imagery intrinsic to the theme, never mere appliqué adornment. Bates is a poetic writer also in the sense that he is concerned with the sensory and the concrete: sometimes it seems that the scenes, rather than the people, are the main characters in his tales.

In the title story of this volume there are the changing seasons in commuters' country; in *Night Run to the West* is the queer ugly cottage on a main road where loneliness is emphasised by the noise of passing lorries; there is the pulsating blue and coral heat of *Summer in Salandar*, brilliant as Van Gogh or Matthew Smith; and the thirty-year-old beauty of a riverside house and garden with its waterlilies and butterflies in *The Queen of Spain Fritillary*. Yet perhaps it would be truer to say that the people and their backcloths explain each other, for H. E. Bates projects himself into the people and their settings in the unegotistical way of the true writer; even to the extent of first-person writing as a seventeen-year-old girl in the final story.

## Controlled Simplicity

It is common for English authors to choose between sensibility and structure; but H. E. Bates is a master of the swift event, the climax, recorded with economy and a evoking shock of surprise. His characters may be weak, unattractive, eccentric, ignoble, but they have the dignity of being individuals, never dots on a graph or figures from a table of statistics, so that one becomes involved with them and cares about their fate, even when much of it consists of "a succession of dull tomorrows".

His style is often bare with the controlled simplicity of a master whose pruned phrases open windows on to vistas of passion and awareness. In each of these stories the focal point is the feeling between man and woman: as in life this is not always happy and successful, but is shown as the deep current bearing humanity from birth to death.

Turning from H. E. Bates' book to the beginning of Phyllis Bentley's *Love and Money* is to leave a world of heightened reality for the atmosphere of a pseudo-

historical film. The first story, set in the fourteenth century, is heavy with cliché and an arch facetiousness only less irritating than the mock-archaic speech. The characters are loosely-imagined "cut-outs", and both this and the second story, of the late seventeenth century, are children's-annual stuff.

But the book improves as it progresses: the sub-title "Seven stories spanning the years 1350 to 1950" leads one to expect that at least half of them will take place before 1650. In fact, after the two stories already mentioned, one belongs to the late eighteenth century and the rest to the nineteenth or twentieth. The whole book illustrates the fact that the nearer the subject to the writer's own experience and knowledge, the more reliable will be the writing. As we leave behind copper-eyelashed heroines called Isabella we meet more credible people, and the Yorkshire setting with its woollen mills gives the book a unity. The tales, with their motives of love and money, become more interesting, though one could do without the author's continual intrusive comments.

## Familiar Friends

Alan Ross, presenting a collection of stories called *Abroad*, reminds us of old friends and introduces us to new ones. The idea is as good a one as another for the theme of an anthology: this contains stories set by each author in a country not his own; no two of the fourteen stories are about the same country; no story was written before 1875; and such easily accessible writers as Kipling, Conrad, Maugham and Hemingway are excluded.

Nine of the stories are likely to be familiar to many readers, but to re-read them is like meeting after a lapse of years a group of former companions. Chekhov's *The Lady With The Dog* is there, a Yalta setting for the delicate complexity of a growing love affair. And so is Osbert Sitwell's *Primavera*, a shocking, satiric vision of the effect of Naples on an elderly spinster. There is Tom Hopkinson's clever *Above the Snow Line*, the end implicit in the beginning, with ski-ing and horse-racing in Switzerland as the scene. In E. M. Forster's *The Road From Colonus* we realise how the paganism of Greece can disrupt the orderly life of a scholarly old Englishman; and going from the Mediterranean to Persian with Harold Nicolson and *Miriam Codd*, epitome of the tiresome American woman traveller, we are entranced by the ironic juxtaposition of persons.

De Maupassant's terrible *A Vendetta* (Corsica and Sardinia) is a model of economy and force. William Sansom's prose is overconscious for some tastes, but he gives a salty, windy impression of dockside Copenhagen in *To Greenland, To Greenland* (sic). The qualities already appreciated in H. E. Bates are vividly apparent in his *The Frontier*, a moving story in which the Indian landscape is the protagonist. Graham Greene's *A Chance For Mr. Lever* is concerned with a victim of the depression trying



MASTER-CRAFTSMAN: H. E. Bates writes short stories which are models for all who wish to learn the craft. He is the author of over 40 books and 300 short stories, and has written a major work of literary criticism and history entitled *The Modern Short Story*. It is a powerful plea for the short story as the form best suited to express our times as the novel expressed the Victorian Age.

Photo Mark Gersen

to retrieve his fortunes by selling machinery in the African jungle; this has something of the haunting quality of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

New to me was James Hanley's *Don Quixote Drowned*, with its below-decks ship-board life, and the single lyrical theme of the character of Crawley, the Chief Steward, scraping farthings together to buy his old mother independence and peace. New also was James Stern's story of *Two Men*, who were duck-shooting in the Bulawayo district until the blood-lust turned even against flamingoes, and then spent itself. Peter Bowles in *Call at Carazón* depicts a ghastly honeymoon in a mosquito-haunted ship travelling the jungle rivers of Vera Cruz: while Ivan Bunin in *The Gentleman From San Francisco* gives a terrifying close-up of life on a luxury liner as enjoyed by a rich American and his family going to Capri before the inconvenience of death reverses the picture.

## Cinematic

As epilogue is the curious diary of Zelda Fitzgerald and F. Scott, *Show Mr. and Mrs. F. to Number —*, which covers in time the years 1921 to 1933 and in space flickers across the beauty spots of Europe and America. This is nostalgically evocative of its period, written in swift, cinema-like, visual images. The whole book should certainly do for its readers what it did for its compiler: encourage a longing to go to the nearest shipping office and book a passage for—anywhere.

**Death of a Huntsman.** H. E. Bates. Michael Joseph, 12s. 6d.

**Love and Money.** Phyllis Bentley. Gollancz, 15s.

**Abroad: Travel Stories.** Selected by Alan Ross. Faber, 15s.