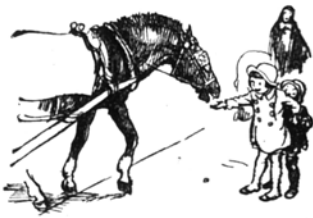


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A drawing by E. H. Shepard from Jan Struther's "Sycamore Square" (Methuen, 5s.)

WHAT the PUBLIC WANTS

Some New Books and New Editions

By H. E. BATES

IN Mr. Herbert Palmer's violent and vital little pamphlet, *What the Public Wants* (Blue Moon Booklets, 1s.), there is a gentleman who declares excitedly: "I've found out exactly what the public wants!" and when asked what that is replies vehemently "Nothing!" This takes one back to Swift, who once wrote, as though embarking on such an article as this: "I am now trying an experiment, very frequent among modern authors, which is to write upon nothing."

What does the public want, and what does it get? Does it, as with Governments, get not so much what it wants as what it asks for? Or does it get what it's given? Does it really want amusing and caustic little books like Mr. Palmer's, the letters of D. H. Lawrence, biographies of Thackeray, immense and exhaustive books on Russia, a story of an African fish that breathes with an actual lung? Would it ever think of asking for such things? No! One is driven to the belief that the Big Public neither knows what it wants nor what to look for, and that Mr. Palmer's vehement gentleman is right.

Nevertheless, there are publics and publics. The watchword of the public I have described above is: "Can you tell me a good book?" A Good Book! The cry of the other is: "By God, have you read So-and-So?"

At the moment little has appeared this autumn for this second public—it awaits Lawrence's letters, Hemingway's book on bull-fighting, some stories, a novel or two—but for the first public the lists are full of what it calls, almost unthinkingly, good books.

There are many novels, but there is only one semi-novel, an odd story-treatise about an African fish by a young American scientist (*Kamongo*, by Howard W. Smith, Cape, 5s.). The fish is the lung-fish, and what little story Mr. Smith tells is the story of his search for that strange fish about Lake Victoria:—

"Lung-fish breathe by means of both lungs and gills. They live in rivers and lakes, but when the dry season comes, if they are trapped in swamps, they dig into the mud and lie buried until the rains come along and cover the land with water again. They can live in the hard mud, breathing by means of their lungs, for months, years—almost in a state of suspended animation."

The story is told to a padre by the scientist on the deck of a ship steaming slowly through the heat of Suez. Mr. Smith, influenced by Conrad, writes prose full of power and atmosphere. The public would never ask for a book like *Kamongo*, but it will miss something very good indeed if it ignores it.

The novels are very varied. One is struck by the title of a novel of a new author (*Home Brewed*, by Oswald H. Davis, Dent, 7s. 6d.), but the beer under the label is not so exciting. Mr. Davis's prose, unlike the excellent beer of which he writes, has not yet drained clear—it is heavy and dull and swims with bits of bad journalese and pretentiousness. His very first page is clouded by expressions like these:

"rather a long, roundabout way," "a pleasance shyly yet vigilantly warding off vandal interruption," and later, "successful functioning of the policy of co-operation prosperity had been garnered in pre-eminent degree." Even in a book about beer Public Number One will hardly tolerate that.

Mr. Davis might learn much from Mr. John Brophy. His novel (*The Rocky Road*, Cape, 7s. 6d. net) is tense, vivid stuff. The scene is first Liverpool and afterwards Ireland. There are no strained expressions here, no journalese, no bits of pretentious redundancy. This book is as hard, clear and tragic as *Peking Picnic* (by Ann Bridge, Chatto and Windus, 7s. 6d.) is light, quick, and changing. This is the Atlantic Monthly Prize novel for 1932, and it forms a good companion piece to a novel of Burma,



One of Helen McKie's illustrations to "My Secret London," by Maud Bigge (Methuen, 5s.)

again by a new writer (*Moonshine*, by Ray Carr, Howe, 7s. 6d.), which is also charming, romantic, and well-written.

Neither of these novels will appeal greatly to Public Number Two, but two other novels, both of England, ought to do so. *Friday's Moon* (by Cecilia Willoughby, Cape, 7s. 6d.) is a Yorkshire tale, which reminds one occasionally of *The Weaver's Web*, with its strong, native idiomatic style and the strength of its characterisation and its wild atmosphere. *The Dove and Roebuck* (by Ena Limebeer, Dent, 7s. 6d.) is also about England—an English village, with minor village characters, and the dominating figure of Louisa Burton, "the Lorelei-like woman who dominates all by her charm and her will." This is a short but vital novel, and Mr. Davis could learn much from Miss Limebeer, who gets her effects as easily and economically as he strives clumsily and redundantly after his.

For the Socialist the most important book of the autumn ought to be *Russia* (by Hans von Eckardt, Cape, 36s.), an immense volume of more than 700 pages, with 13 maps and 127 illustrations, which is a history not merely of the Russia of our own day, but a "comprehensive account of Russia, ancient and modern, political, social and economic," from the year A.D. 1000, beginning with the foundation of the Norse-Russian state and the adoption of Greek Christianity, and ending with the achievements of the present system under the Five-Year Plan. This is a colossal book. The author was statistician to a zemstvo before the Revolution.

Side by side with this immense treatise can be put Maurice Hindus' *Humanity Uprooted*, which has just been reissued with its clever and amusing

illustrations in the Life and Letters Series (Cape, 4s. 6d.). This deals solely with a modern Russia, and is the book of which H. G. Wells wrote, "It answers a score of questions I've been asking about Russia and a score of others I should have asked had I known enough to ask them."

An excellent little biography of Wells himself has also just been reissued—*A Sketch for a Portrait*, by Geoffrey West (Olympus Library, Howe, 4s. 6d.). This is an admirable study of Wells as an author, Socialist, cosmopolitan, Fabian, and journalist—the last his own consistent title for himself. Mr. West is one of the most brilliant of younger critics.

Lastly, a bed book. This ought to have been done before, and now that it has been done (*The Bedside Book*, Gollancz, 7s. 6d.), there is certain to be almost as large a public for it as *The Week-End Book*. Nevertheless one must deplore much of it. Its author has followed very often the lines of *The Week-End Book* and has included many, many things which we are all so tired of seeing in anthologies. Some of the poems he includes have surely appeared in a thousand. There is room for an anthologist of the unknown, of gems that have never been reprinted.

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