

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1932.

Honest Bread and Cheese

By
H. E.
Bates



Leo Walmsley
Author of
"Three Fevers"

THE novels on this list are all, except one, clever and delicate bits of workmanship. They are interesting and charming, but they are like bright coloured food and drink—one itches to taste, but having tasted one feels cheated and still hungry. Oh! one sighs, for a bit of honest bread and cheese, a novelistic glass of beer, a literary onion! The breath will stink, there will be something not quite nice about it, but one will go satisfied. Mr. Walmsley, fortunately, provides that bread and cheese, that beer and that onion. He generously provides the salt too and the taste of him lingers in the mouth very powerfully.

Unrelieved Brilliance

The hero of *Marriage in Heaven* is an artist in stained glass. This is typical of Mr. Fraser and significant also, for the novel itself is very like a piece of stained glass, exquisite and brilliant, dazzling and intricate, but flat and lifeless. When Adrian Douglas falls in love with Linet Rockingham Adrian is so interesting a personality and Linet so lovely and vital a figure that one is prepared to be enchanted out of oneself by Mr. Fraser's delineation of their love. The backgrounds against which that love moves are delightful, the atmosphere is charming, the conversation is scintillating, the writing itself is quivering with light and colour. But something is missing, one feels, or perhaps false or overdone.

Marriage in Heaven recalls Mr. Charles Morgan's *The Fountain*, where the same continued exquisiteness aroused suspicion, where Mr. Morgan, as though himself uncertain as to the fates of his characters, dallied and juggled with words in order to distract us. Both Mr. Fraser and Mr. Morgan have attempted to write novels of sustained, unbroken beauty, but both lack a sense of contrast, Mr. Fraser especially—the contrast of light against shade, delicacy against strength. That defect in Mr. Fraser leaves his work as flat and lifeless as his hero's own glass.

Hans Andersen Again

The Orchid is a fairy-tale—modern, whimsical, slight in both content and

effect. Some of Mr. Nathan's characters, such as Mr. Pembauer, the pianist, Mr. Gambrino, the roundabout proprietor, and Miss Grogarty, the actress, are in the Hans Andersen tradition. They are descended from the swineherd, the ugly duckling, and the princess on the pea, and their great common characteristic is ambition—in Mr. Pembauer the ambition to be a great pianist, in Gambrino the desire to be a great tenor, in Miss Grogarty the longing to be both beautiful and famous.

Thus in each of his characters Mr. Nathan possesses material for fun and satire, for pity and irony, for whimsicality and tragedy. These are his little puppets, and he moves them as the fancy takes him, tenderly, grotesquely, cynically, cruelly, but always with skill and felicity. Perhaps after all his novel resembles not so much a fairy-tale as a marionette show.

Neither Mr. Fraser nor Mr. Nathan has attempted to break with tradition. They are conservative writers. Miss Boyle is a rebel. Her style, unlike theirs, is not smooth and polished; it has a restless, tangled rhythm which here and there breaks into arresting music; it is thoughtful, individual, difficult to read, hard to assimilate. You will not read her novel lightly between the bacon and the marmalade. It is like an intricate tune that must be heard again and again before one can understand even a bar of it.



Reviewed On This Page

- MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN. By Ronald Fraser (Cape 7/6).
THE ORCHID. By Robert Nathan (Elkin, Mathews and Marrot. 6/-).
YEAR BEFORE LAST. By Kay Boyle (Faber. 7/6).
THREE FEVERS. By Leo Walmsley (Cape. 7/6).

"Before them the lights of the car were eating a soft, dusty path through the accumulating dark. And here the claws of cactus and teeth of pine were at them, and the stones that lay about on the slopes were as white and lofty as the moon. Here the stones were so plentiful that they might have dammed all the waters of earth and heaven. There was no wind blowing, but this great wind of night seemed to blow past their faces. There were no longer any voices speaking, and before they could answer each other their hands fled together and their mouths fell upon each other in famine."

Such a passage as this claims to be read again and again for its metaphors alone. It is, perhaps, too full of imagery, but one cannot deny its brilliance and force.

If only Miss Boyle's characters possessed the strength of her prose, her novel might well have been big and

satisfying, but Martin Sheehan and the women with whom he travels "against the sunlit landscape of Provence, beside the Mediterranean at Nice, Cannes, and Monte Carlo" seem never to become more than the shadows of certain characters of Ernest Hemingway. As such they are not worthy of Miss Boyle's strong and original prose, nor of the individual method of analysis with which she approaches them. They are faintly amusing, but one does not, as the wrapper says, live, laugh, and suffer with them. One stands apart, admiring Miss Boyle's originality of thought and prose, but not caring at all what happens to her people.

The Feud

Contrast Mr. Fraser, Mr. Nathan, and Miss Boyle with Mr. Walmsley. Against the dazzling wine and delicate caviare of their writings he has nothing to offer us but literary bread and cheese, beer, and onion. As prose writers they can laugh at him; for their thousands of tricks of subtlety and imagery he hasn't one; one might go through his book searching in vain for a poetical line or a dazzling simile; he writes like a boy with the stub of pencil that he cannot trouble to sharpen.

Yet *Three Fevers* is quivering with life. Its conviction is immense, the force of its atmosphere is overwhelming. Open *Three Fevers*, and you are at once at sea with the Länns or ashore with the Fosdyks, laughing at the Lunns for being so mad as to lay lobster-pots in January; you are carried away at once into a bitter and relentless feud between these two families of North-East Coast fishermen until you become infected not only with their fevers, lobster-fever, cod-fever, and salmon-fever, but with their love of the sea and their hatred of each other; you are in every boat of theirs which puts out, and in every storm they weather, and at every haul they make.

Conrad Recalled

Contrast Mr. Walmsley's fishermen with the sophisticated and elegant ghosts that his three contemporaries offer us. With Mr. Walmsley there is no brilliant word-conjuring in order to make us believe in his people. His own conception of them is too intense. His style is rough, simple, pedestrian stuff, but his feeling for the atmosphere of seas and skies and wind and storm is so profound that it would not be out of place to compare him with Conrad, and his conception of character is so powerful that not one single person in his book lacks conviction. Eat his bread and cheese and drink his beer, and feel satisfied. And salt?—there is salt in every word on every page.

The Fabian Summer School's Twenty-Sixth Annual Session will be held this year at Frensham Heights School, Rowledge, near Farnham, Surrey. It is expected that Bernard Shaw will attend, and speakers for the four weeks include Sidney Webb, G. D. H. Cole, Lord Ponsonby, Commander Kenworthy, A. L. Rowse, Pethick-Lawrence, Hugh R. Williamson, Miss Susan Lawrence and Alderman Emil Davies. All information can be had from the Secretary of the Fabian Society, at 11, Dartmouth Street, S.W.1.