

THE JACARANDA TREE. H. E. Bates. *Michael Joseph*. 9s. 6d. *Book Society Choice*.

THERE WERE THREE MEN. Helen Beauclerk. *Gollancz*. 10s. 6d.

NOT AT HOME. Doris Langley-Moore. *Cassell*. 10s. 6d.

THE RETURN OF FURSEY. Mervyn Wall. *Pilot Press*. 9s. 6d.

THE *Jacaranda Tree* is a perfect example of the later Bates manner. It is a dramatic story, supremely well told, of the flight of a handful of people from Burma to India before the threat of the oncoming Japanese. Thousands of people perished in that panic-stricken exodus through the fever-infested jungle and across the vulture-haunted plain; years later our returning armies found the wrecked abandoned cars and piles of bones. The fate of the mixed party of Europeans and Burmese who are the characters of this novel is in the balance all the time, and if there is nothing in the book with the force of the central incident of *The Purple Plain*, there is constant tension and skilful unravelling of human behaviour under stress. The author has mastered the art of telling a whole life story in revelatory flashes. The flabby middle-aged woman, a figure of fun in the European colony, is reintegrated; the little Eurasian nurse conquers the uncertainties of her mixed blood and rises to heroism, the selfish charmer perishes miserably, the English girl who has been a victim of Burma all her life, dies there in the end. The chief character, a man named Paterson who organizes the escape, has outraged British susceptibilities by insisting that his Burmese mistress and her brother, his boy, should accompany them and there is a faint odour of inverted snobbery in the author's persistent fondling of the Burmese, who nevertheless remain pretty pictures. Paterson himself does not have the weight and clarity which his central position requires. But this is a novel which can be read with pleasure by everyone, by the ordinary reader for its dramatic story and brilliant rendering of the scene, by the critic in admiration of the writer's perfect literary equipment.

Nothing is meaner than the disparagement of a writer who, after years of good work poorly recompensed, achieves popular success. The assumption that a book read with pleasure by 50,000 people is *ipso facto* inferior to the one which a select 1,200 rave about

also has its pitfalls. It remains true, however, that a man who writes for his living over a course of years has either to repeat himself or to extend his inquiry into fields of experience which impair the integrity of his talent. In the process of becoming a popular novelist Bates has been driven from the field of imaginative analysis, where his poetic vision and supple prose served him best, to the field of action where it seems less intense and even sometimes perfunctory. This book is brilliantly written, it has the classic ingredients of heroism and human weakness in tension, yet somehow it is not moving: I feel that the fusion of the writer with the experience is incomplete.

A SIMILAR impression, due to different causes and much more easily analysed, assails the reader of *There were Three Men*, a very detailed and intelligent reconstruction of the life of a group of people during the first thirty odd years of this century. It would be unfair to call this a "cavalcade" novel although it makes liberal use of a good deal of period furniture, including that most fatiguing of all things, the intellectual back-chat of twenty years ago. It is a study of personalities, of the effect of character on fortune and particularly of the havoc wrought by sexual passion. The three men are Paul Hanwell, a poor young man with his way to make, who is seduced by every distraction his world has to offer; Dr. Loggett, the ubiquitous spectator of life and Horace Ashcot, a natural victim; three key types of our own and perhaps of every other time. Miss Beauclerk's analysis is acute but her style is heavy and the book is too cluttered with detail. There is ample drama but it is not effectively presented; it is the artist's job to clear up the muddle of real life.

THE great charm of Doris Langley-Moore's *Not at Home* is its description of the perfect house. If your mouth waters at a catalogue of delicate flower pieces, Bristol glass, old books in rare bindings, Victorian silks and Regency furniture, this is your book. It is a comedy of manners centring round the agonies experienced by a maiden aunt who lets half her house to a pretentious slut who breaks china and plants Tottenham Court Road vulgarities among the exquisite *objets d'art*. In my view this is ground for homicide but Mrs. Langley-Moore produces a neat and immoral plot