

# The Short Story and H. E. Bates

## Recent Books

# Old Tales and New Twists

**I**N A recent NEW CLARION H. E. Bates considered some of the names that contribute to the revival of the short story. No mention was made there, perhaps understandably, of the name of H. E. Bates. But no student of the literature of the present day could think of the English short story without thinking of this writer as one of its principal exponents.

In his life H. E. Bates has lived in the town and the country, and has been in the closest touch with the people and things of both. He has really felt them both, and it is his power that can make his readers feel them again.

But there is no obvious contrast between these two elements of town and country in his stories, no easy and mistaken assumption that ugliness belongs only to one and beauty to the other. Actually he can invest whichever he is writing about with the greatest lyrical beauty, and often it is from the sternest touches of realism that his most lovely moments emerge.

A story like "Harvest," in his early work, has its own particular beauty of the country. But this beauty in his writing draws its inspiration no less from a London slum than a harvest field, and one of his latest stories, "The Story Without an End," which has recently been so enthusiastically received by the critics, finds in the story of a miserably bullied French boy in a squalid Soho restaurant some touches of real beauty.

The short story in the hands of H. E. Bates may express itself in any one of many forms. It may range from the spirit of a single moment or a tiny incident captured in a comparatively short space, like "Two Candles" or "The Spring Song," to a long development that follows several characters perhaps through some years in their lives.

Such famous longer stories as "The Black Boxer," "The Hessian Prisoner," or "Sally Go Round the Moon," as well as two stories specifically devoted to the travel theme, "Alexander" and "A German Idyll," show how the novel may develop from the short story in the way that "Charlotte's Row" actually did.

In the same way, the moods of the stories are of a great variety. "Obadiah," printed in THE NEW CLARION recently, is a good example of the lighter mood that finds fresh and delightful humour in a pointed anecdote, and so is the perfect "A Tinker's Donkey." Both of these stories and others like them are a good contrast in laughter to some that go more deeply into the emotions, and you might hear the essence of both of them in any village pub.

But whatever his mood or his treatment, H. E. Bates can always bring the most vivid creation to what he is describing. "You can smell the bread baking," was said by a reader of "The Baker's Wife." This is one of the author's great powers. The reader always feels just what it is intended he should feel, whether it is the silence of a sunrise or the noise and lights of a crowded fair at night.

There is just the right touch of suggestion and description to make the reader do the rest for himself with his own imagination. This is one of H. E. Bates's greatest gifts, and it has helped to put his short stories among the first in the English literature of the present day.

MICHAEL BALKWILL.

**M**RS. E. NESBIT transformed the old-fashioned fairy tale out of all real life so that children can actually live magic through her enchanting stories.

She invented a string of astonishing fairy-godmothers—the Psammead, the monkey-like fairy dug out of the sand; the Mouldiwarp, that talks in dialect; or the Phoenix, hatched out of the nursery hearth.

Children devour her books more greedily than those of Lewis Carroll or Hans Andersen. And now we have a biography—"E. Nesbit," by Doris Langley Moore (Benn, 15s.)—that for the first time reveals the vivid life of this most lovable of children's writers.

There was nothing placid or matronly about her. Edith Nesbit and her brilliant husband, Hubert Bland, were life-long



... a nursery for young writers and artists. ...

Socialists, and were among the founders of the Fabian Society in 1884. Bland acted as chairman at the first meeting, and was treasurer for 26 years. Those were days when to be a Socialist was all that was outrageous, and the Blands were among the most "advanced," "aesthetic" and Bohemian of the set.

Edith was positively athletic—she could ride, row, swim, and even cycle (horrors!) in serge bloomers—and she was one of the first women to cut her hair short as a fashion and to smoke in public.

And what a nursery the Blands' hospitable though needy home was for young writers and artists! All their lives they were welcoming some of the best brains of the day, men and women then hardly recognised—Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Laurence Housman, Gerald Gould, H. W. Nevinson, and later Noel Coward—and scores of others.

H. G. Wells has described the Blands' home at Eltham as "a place to which one rushed down from town at the week-end to snatch one's bed before anyone else got it."

Edith had her domestic troubles in full measure. It fell to her in her early married days to support, with her writing, a sick husband and a baby. She faced this and

worse trials with a courageous heart, and her loyalty to Hubert—an admirable companion though a deplorable husband—seems almost too heroic to be true.

The two kept themselves by their journalism, and it is one of the most surprising things in literature that, after being compelled to be a hack writer for twenty years, she should have produced at the age of over forty her wholly artistic children's tales such as "The Would-be-Goods" and "The House of Arden."

Her Socialism comes out in many of her books—notably in her hatred of ugly factories, slums and jerry-building. She and her husband helped to convert hundreds to the cause, and they were always befriending some unknown person or other. A prize in a children's book-reviewing competition in THE CLARION in 1913 was won by a little girl who reviewed "Five Children and It." It was characteristic of Mrs. Nesbit that she immediately wrote to the young reviewer thanking her and giving her encouragement as a writer.

E. Nesbit had an enormous output. Yet already nearly all of it is dead, save for her children's books. And these, though she never rated them as her best work, will be thumbed and re-thumbed as long as children have birthday presents.

G. W. W.

## New "Thrillers"

**"DEATH ON MY LEFT,"** by Philip MacDonald (The Crime Club, 7s. 6d.). The English aspirant for the heavy-weight championship of the world is found dead in the ring at his training quarters. From this situation the author works out ingeniously an enthralling story attractive to boxing enthusiasts as well as to the habitual readers of thrillers. Besides the shrewd calculations of Colonel Gethryn there are lurid descriptions of fights in the ring. The most vivid part of this gripping book is a living description of a coroner's inquest accurately depicted in every detail.

**MURDER** in a newspaper office, a night gambling den, drugs discovered in a mysterious mansion, a Chinese mandarin in his native robes, and the throwing of Chinese daggers in a London fog—these are the ingredients that make up "The Mystery of the Golden Angel," by Francis D. Grierson (The Crime Club, 7s. 6d.). Why the newspaper reporter was murdered, why the newspaper proprietor's blonde secretary should disguise as a Chinese boy, and why the amateur detective should beat Scotland Yard at its own game you will discover in this hair-raising thriller, which all mystery story fans will enjoy.

**"THE Gold Rim,"** by Irene Rathbone (Dent, 7s. 6d.), tells a charming love story. The writing is delicate and sensitive, and the setting alternates between a delightful house in the country and a drab London apartment.

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