

FLESHLY LIAISONS

FRANÇOISE SAGAN: *Wonderful Clouds*. Translated by Anne Green. 124pp. John Murray. 10s. 6d.

H. E. BATES: *The Day of the Tortoise*. 94pp. Michael Joseph. 7s. 6d.

SARAH KILPATRICK: *The Phoenix Hour*. 192pp. Abelard-Schuman. 15s.

Extreme youth is today an acceptable substitute for talent, and Mlle. Sagan is already twenty-five. Since the little fever of *Bonjour Tristesse* the graph has steadily dipped: with *Wonderful Clouds* the downward curve runs on. This glib *novella* is about a young American, Alan, whose jealousy for his French wife Josée impels her to a number of, as it were, justificatory amours. Alan's obsession (a boy's sticky-toffee greed, really) is expressed in such terms as "Two human beings ought to be able to live tightly, breathlessly clutched to one another", which is reminiscent of the "deep, dark, bitter belly-tension" of Mr. Mybug in *Cold Comfort Farm*. Alan's possessive nagging becomes as depressing for the reader as for Josée; boring too—the whole novel seems an essay in reiteration.

For relief we are tritely philosophized at:

Whoever asked to live? It's as though we'd been invited to spend the weekend in a country house full of rotten planks and treacherous staircases, a house where we look in vain for the owner. God, or whoever it may be. But nobody's there. . . .

This sort of thing is totally consistent with the cardboard characterization and the steady gush of cliché (" . . . Her feelings were like a wild animal, furious at being recaptured").

With her "smart" distribution of the action between Florida, New York and Paris, her glossy stock situations, her fashionable sweet-and-sour cookery, Mlle. Sagan proclaims that she is aware of the level of her appeal. And yet there was a time when she was bracketed with genuinely estimable names. ("My main influences?" said a teen-age novelist in a TV play. "Oh, the usual—Colette, Proust, Sagan.") With *Wonderful Clouds* the disenchantment is complete.

Mr. Bates's little book is hardly even a *novella*—a real Batesian short story rather, blown out to book-size by Peter Farmer's pretty illustrations. This is a simple tale about Fred Tomlinson, bachelor of fifty-seven,

who has three sisters to look after: dumpy, pink, vain, lazy Flossie; Ella, who prays all day for the souls of animals and every Thursday holds a sort of communion service with William the tortoise; Aggie, who lives on cocoa and fried fish, sends uplifting messages by magpie, and writes letters to the famous, both living and dead. Fred is busy meanwhile with jamming, talking to the budgies, and making custard. A typically English ménage.

Fred's life changes when a new, friendly, gin-loving girl appears at the local dairy. He is made to see his Cinderella status; he entertains his new friend with birthday wine and lobster and waxes his moustache with mayonnaise. He essays modern dance; even the budgerigars learn pop-songs. And then his sisters confront him and, anyway, the girl has to go off to join the married man who has made her pregnant.

Like all Mr. Bates's work, this story is acutely and aromatically realized. It buzzes and sweats with summer. Sometimes, again typically, floods of descriptive detail drown what are essentially simple images. But, gentle and sensuous, compassionate without ever heeling over into sentimentality, *The Day of the Tortoise* remains joyously readable.

In *The Phoenix Hour* a schoolmistress at a mixed grammar school finds the frustration of her loneliness eased by an attachment to a sixth-form boy to whom she gives tuition in English literature. Deserted childless by a husband who has become philoprogenitive with his vulgar mistress, she sees in the boy the son she might have had, sees also something of the husband and lover. But the relationship is never grossly externalized in the conventional terms of the popular novel; it remains unspoken, implied. Meanwhile, fleshly but wholesome liaisons blossom charmingly and painfully among the pupils. There is accurate observation here (some grammar schools are really like this) expressed in a style that is both economical and allusive. This is a tender, intelligent first novel.