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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

"Feud" in the Western Isles

THE BROTHERS. By L. A. G. STRONG. Gollancz. 7s. 6d.

THERE has always been an element of uncertainty about even the best of Mr. Strong's work, as though he were never quite happy in seeking to express himself through the medium of prose. His stories, though always escaping the effect of being meretricious, have had very often a wooden stiffness about them, giving one the impression that they had been too laboriously put together. In *The Brothers*, however, there is little or none of this uncertainty, and the woodenness is not evident at all.

The story takes place in the Western Highlands of Scotland, along that piece of coast where the island of Skye broods close against the mainland, and the characters, with two exceptions, are fisher-folk who farm when they are not fishing and drink when they are not farming. There are no drawing-room antics in the lives of the Macraes and the McPhees and the McFarishes. They are strong, salt, bitter, primitive folk, as wild and hard as the coast on which they struggle for a living. They have all the peasant virtues and vices—courage and determination most marked among the virtues, suspicion, narrowness, superstition and jealousy among the vices. The men also get drunk and whore and fight and keep alive the ancient and bitter feuds without which their lives would be incomplete.

There are two brothers, John and Fergus Macrae, and with these Mr. Strong is principally concerned. John is weak, cowardly but clever with his head; Fergus is like a rugged god, immensely strong, full of native cunning, the best fisherman on the coast, the toughest rower, the hardest drinker. The Macraes have carried on an ageless feud with the McFarishes, among whom Willie McFarish equals Fergus for strength and cunning. In the Macrae household lives a girl named Mary, not herself a Macrae, but an orphan sent out to service from a Glasgow orphanage. She is a shy creature, decently spoken and attractive. She sometimes bathes, naked, in a rock pool in a quiet inlet; otherwise she cooks, scrubs, fetches home the cows, and works as hard as the men. Little by little both John and Fergus fall for her, only to discover that she has already half fallen for Willie McFarish. The old feud flares up like a burning well of oil, more wildly and bitterly than ever, until the McFarishes are wiped out by a storm at sea. From that moment the feud goes on between the two brothers, and is ended only by death.

The vim and strength in the souls of these people seems to have penetrated into Mr. Strong's blood. His writing is firm and certain, while at the same time being nervous and full of life, and I can see nothing wrong with his psychology or in his interpretation of the moods of sea and sky. Fergus is his best figure and John is hardly worthy, even on the grounds of contrast, to stand beside him. The descriptions of Fergus fishing and of Fergus fighting with the conger-eel and of Fergus fighting with Willie McFarish are all full of strength and are done with admirable accuracy. John has inspired Mr. Strong to nothing half so good. He is thin, but he just remains true to character and he serves his purpose.

In spite of all this excellence Mr. Strong has been guilty of one or two tricks which I imagined even amateur writers no longer employed. "So came the evenings of the first chapter in this story," reads like a penny romance with a moral. And again "But this is not the end," at the close of the last chapter but one. If Mr. Strong were a playwright it would be ludicrous for him to rush on to the stage at the end of the

last scene but one, shouting desperately "But this is not the end!" It is just as ludicrous for him to do it as a novelist. There are other slips of the same kind, and also an unnecessary repetition of certain words, notably "cess-pool." These are minor faults, however, and the book is good enough to rise above them.****

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

WEDLOCK. By Jacob Wassermann. Allen and Unwin. 7s. 6d. Wassermann is surely the first of living psychological novelists. He is massive and deep. And he really does throw light upon dark human nature. In this book he takes a lawyer at the height of his profession, a man of order and discipline, whose mind goes to pieces through his being brought into contact with a woman who makes him love her. The woman is an actress and he knows how evil her effect has been on other men. That does not save him. Nothing can save him but the common sense of his wife, the deep spiritual understanding of a woman of no great intellectual gifts, an understanding born of wedlock. The book is heavy, saved only by some highly dramatic situations, but is worth

A First Glance at the New Books

Shaw as

THREE new volumes are published today in the Standard Edition of the works of Bernard Shaw (Constable, 6s. each), *Man and Superman*, *Saint Joan* and *The Apple Cart*, and *Major Critical Essays*. The latter volume contains "The Quintessence of Ibsenism" (1891) "The Perfect Wagnerite" (1898) and "The Sanity of Art" (1895). In these essays Shaw is shown at his early best; they rank as classics of controversial writing. The first is still an unsurpassed introduction to Ibsen's plays, written with passionate belief in "his message and the need for it." Ibsen, he declares, is "one of the major prophets of the modern Bible." His work was an "attack on ideals and idealism," opposing them with "realistic morality." The technical novelty of Ibsen's plays was that they "included discussion." The famous exposition and exposure of Wagner is still as lively reading as ever, and the essay on art, which has been unobtainable for a long time, has a magnificent preface in defence of journalism.

THE HOGARTH LETTERS (Hogarth Press, 1s. each) are small pamphlets, written in letter form because it gives the writer full excuse for saying what he likes. *A Letter on the French Pictures*, by Raymond Mortimer, makes us wonder for whom the letter is printed. The writing is smart and as careless as a letter can afford to be. But what help is it to anyone to be told of Rubens' "witchcraft in the use of paint"? "There are a hundred reasons for enjoying a picture and they are all of them good," is the best sentence in it. *A Letter to W. B. Yeats*, by L. A. G. Strong, is an essay in praise of the poet "as the acknowledged head of his profession." "All that you have written," says Mr. Strong, "is for initiates," in his enthusiastic tribute. *A Letter from a Black Sheep*, by Francis Birrell, is about things in general. The best bit is "On Baldwin's advice I laid down a cellar of Mary Webb in the new