

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

## A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

*Birds Which Will Not Fly*SOFT ANSWERS. By RICHARD ALDINGTON.  
Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.

MR. ALDINGTON has here collected five long short-stories, and, as though to conceal the fact that they are all satirical in nature, he has given each of them a sub-title; he presents us with a warning, an elegy, a mystery story, a speculation, and a record.

It is really all bluff, for there is very little mystery about the mystery story, very little speculation about the speculation, and so on. Primarily the stories are satirical. "Yes, Aunt," which is a warning, is the story of a pappy young man who sponges on his aunts and behaves altogether as though he had jelly in his head instead of brains, and lemonade in his veins instead of blood. "Now She Lies There," an elegy, is the record of a girl with a tape-worm figure and a vicious mind. "Nobody's Baby," the mystery story, satirizes a most despicable type of artistic imposter. There is no mystery, at least, about Mr. Aldington's intentions here. "A Gentleman of England" is too obviously Mr. Aldington's game. "Stepping Heavenward," which I believe has appeared before, is modestly described as a record, but is probably the bitterest piece of all.

Mr. Aldington has, I think, something in common with Mr. Somerset Maugham. The game of speculating on a writer's influences is a dangerous one, but he might owe something also to Samuel Butler. His weak young men bear some resemblance to Ernest Pontifex, though they are even less admirable, and the bitterness with which he writes of Constance in "Now She Lies There" recalls some of Mr. Maugham's acid portraits of women. Like Maugham and Butler, he also writes in a calm, dry, apparently effortless and indifferent manner. He has a genius for being diabolical while appearing to be tolerant. His very humour has a sting in it. His bitterest touches are sometimes so slight and subtle that they are easy to miss entirely.

In short, he has most, if not all, the weapons of the satirist. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in all the stories in *Soft Answers* he has made one common and damning error. His pappy young man, his gentleman of England, his vicious young lady, his literary imposter are not worth, I feel, one drop of the vitriol which he has hurled at them. No man pots at partridges skulking in the stubble; the prey is too easy. But all Mr. Aldington's characters seem to me to be birds skulking on the ground. They are all such easy, obvious victims. The pappy young man, with his aunts, bally well overdrawn at the bank, is the stock figure for gently satirical fun in any third-rate musical comedy. He does not need Mr. Aldington's acid to kill him; he has been dead for long enough. Yet Mr. Aldington has wasted sixty pages on him. He might have sketched him diabolically in six. Similarly with "A Gentleman of England." Is Harold, with the responsibilities of the family name, any more difficult or worthy figure than Oswald, with his aunts? Hasn't he, too, been dead for long enough? Was he ever, in any case, anything more than a pure type? Constance is more

worthy of Mr. Aldington, and his picture of the sham, artistic world at the feet of Mr. Charlemagne Cox, the great pianist, is a fast and stimulating bit of work. But the final impression is that Mr. Aldington, superbly and devilishly armed with all the weapons of satire, has been attacking figures of cardboard—an occupation surely unworthy of his uncommon talent!\*\*\* H. E. BATES

*Other Novels of the Week*

ETZEL ANDERGAST. By Jacob Wassermann. Allen and Unwin. 10s. The further history of the hero of *The Maurizius Case*, starting in the Germany of 1913, the chief characters being in addition to Etzel, a young physician and his wife. Personal relations are the author's theme, and the part played by the lives of ordinary people in the circle of affairs. Not a novel for hasty reading. It presents a profound and dramatic unfolding of human fate.\*\*\*\*

FLIGHT INTO DARKNESS. By Arthur Schnitzler. Cassell. 6s. The last book by the great Viennese writer. A study of a man who feared that he would die at his brother's hands. Few other writers have had such penetrating insight into the psychic weaknesses of man.\*\*\*\*

THE GREATER TRUMPS. By Charles Williams. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. A supernatural thriller. The part played in human destiny by the Tarot cards. Skilfully constructed, witty, touching a very deep note at times. Will be enjoyed most by those who have some interest in psychology.\*\*\*\*

STRICKEN GODS. By John Lindsey. 7s. 6d. Chapman and Hall. English village life seen as intense drama. Ordinary people so passionately understood that they become large tragic figures. A fine achievement.\*\*\*\*

THE SAINT AND MARY KATE. By Frank O'Connor. Macmillan. 7s. 6d. The slums of Cork are the scene of this splendid tale. A young man who dreams of religion and a young woman who knows the world. Mr. O'Connor owes much to other Irish writers. But he has his own genius, too. If he remains in Ireland he may do what no other writer of our day has done.\*\*\*\*

EXCESS BAGGAGE. By H. M. Raleigh. Methuen. 7s. 6d. A classic of farcical fun. Captain Raleigh, who is a son of the late Sir Walter Raleigh, promises to be our next great humorist.\*\*\*

O PROVIDENCE. By John Hampson. Hogarth Press. 7s. 6d. This is a story of boyhood and the author shirks no unpleasantness in painting a scrupulous and detailed picture. Yet it is an oddly unsatisfying book, although it has obviously been written with the greatest regard for accuracy and truth.\*\*

TALES FROM TWO POCKETS. By Karel Capek. Faber. 7s. 6d. Comic crime stories, high-spirited, paradoxical, and full of good sense.\*\*\*

CITY OF ENCOUNTERS. By Thomas Burke. Constable. 7s. 6d. London stories told with great spirit by the most romantic Londoner alive.\*\*\*

To enable readers to judge the merits of novels at a glance, we add stars to these short notices. Five stars denotes a masterpiece, four stars a novel of outstanding quality, and so down to one star.