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A Novel of the Week

By H. E. BATES

A Modern Hans Andersen

Robert Nathan

THE ORCHID. By ROBERT NATHAN. Elkin Mathews and Marrot. 6s.

WRITING thirty years ago, in his preface to Turgenev's *The Jew*, Mr. Edward Garnett spoke of the novel as being the most complex of all literary instruments and declared "that the novel can become anything, can be anything, according to the hands that use it." Since that time the novel has manifested itself in a thousand forms, from the trilogies of Galsworthy and Henry Handel Richardson to the fat children of Mr. Priestley and novels like *The Orchid*, which is scarcely more than a short story.

The Orchid, indeed, is not unlike a fairy story and Mr. Nathan might be described as a modern Hans Andersen. His characters, Professor Pembauer the pianist, Miss Grogarty the actress, Mr. Gambrino the roundabouts proprietor (late tenor of La Scala, Milan), are direct descendants of the emperor, the princess on a pea and the swineherd of Andersen. In their occupations and appearances they would seem to be normal humdrum human beings, but in their actions and thought and speech they are of another world, the Andersen world of fantasy and quaintness, of delicious irony and of fury that leads to tragedy. As in Andersen, Mr. Nathan's characters are full of lofty aspirations. Professor Pembauer "had great hopes of a career; he was young, and his friends at home expected him to be another Rubinstein"; Miss Grogarty longs only to be an artist—"to be beautiful, or to be famous and to be admired; what joy, what happiness!" Mr. Gambrino, with a little health, would have been a primo tenora—a great success. Had he not held a B flat for a minute and three-quarters? Mrs. O'Connor, who is Miss Grogarty's hairdresser, aspires to be the patron of Mr. Gambrino's art.

Mr. Nathan, like Hans Andersen, finds in these inspirations material for fun and tragedy, for irony and sympathy, for philosophy and laughter. It is the loftiness of his characters' dreams and hopes contrasted with their outwardly humdrum lives that is humorous; it

is the inevitable ordinariness of daily life against the beauty of the things that they long for but never obtain that is ironic and tragic.

Not that these emotions and effects are so sharply defined. Mr. Nathan is subtle. His effects are very often so delicately and airily brought off that one suspects nothing. His style, though apparently as simple as Andersen's, is really intricate with subtleties, innuendoes, quiet allusions. He is a conjuror with words, producing miracles of effect from the baldest and emptiest materials.

The construction of the book, though apparently artless, is intricate too, but it would ruin a good deal of its effect to summarize it here. The scene is modern America, though it might just as easily have been modern Munich or Vienna or even London. Mr. Nathan's people are universal; their love-affairs and cross love-affairs are as old as love. *The Orchid* is a delicious trifle.****

H. E. BATES

Other Novels of the Week

THE INNER JOURNEY. By Kurt Heuser. Secker. 7s. 6d. A German philosophical novel of East Africa perfectly translated. The journey is into the unknown continent, but also into the undiscovered continent of the soul. The native life is realized with astonishing understanding, and the reactions of black and white upon each other are shown with deep insight.****

NYPH ERRANT. By James Laver. Heinemann. 7s. 6d. An Oxford girl having finished her education in Lausanne is returning home alone when she allows a man in the train to speak to her with the result that she has the adventures that girls perhaps dream of, finishing up in a Turkish harem. She reaches home a year late and with no one the wiser. Dare we enquire into Mr. Laver's object in writing the book?****

THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH VIRGINS. By Marguerite Steen. Gollancz. 7s. 6d. A girl-child of the slums who "lived outside the conditions of her life" is the central figure of this realistic novel. Miss Steen sees romance in a one-room tenement in company with a drunken mother and a crowd of starving children. The sentiment is strengthened with irony and a sense of humour. Highly distinguished.****

WHEN THE WICKED MAN. By Ford Madox Ford. Cape. 7s. 6d. New York is the setting. An old established publishing business in the hands of speculators the occasion. An Englishman searching for his soul, the theme. A subtle and intensely "modern" book, in which Mr. Ford once more satirizes the age.****

CAFÉ BAR. By G. Scott Moncrieff. Wishart. 7s. 6d. The café is near Shaftesbury Avenue and its dubious record is put down in close detail. The author conveys a complete sense of reality. Recommended.***

JOCUND DAY. By T. R. Feverel. Grant Richards. 7s. 6d. Youth and the mess it is in, is the theme of this youthful novel. London types well sketched. "Not for young misses," says the publisher unnecessarily.***

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