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A SPECIALIST IN THE MACABRE

KISS, KISS. By Roald Dahl. (Michael Joseph: 15s.)

By H. E. BATES

MR. ROALD DAHL is Norwegian by parentage, was born and brought up in Wales, served as a fighter pilot in the R.A.F., is married to the actress Patricia Neal, is a connoisseur of wine, furniture and painting, grows old-fashioned rose species, bets much on horses and now spends half his time in this country and half in America; and it is perhaps this international quality in his make-up that gives his short stories their most immediately obvious characteristic, that of being highly cosmopolitan. The peculiar flavours in "Kiss, Kiss" will find ready palates in London, New York, Paris, Rome and even, I shouldn't wonder, Moscow. Already in fact, and not surprisingly, New Yorkers have taken the stories to their hearts.

My younger daughter as a small child wrote a charming story called "Stewed George." If only she had developed her talents in that direction she might, by this time, have rivalled Mr. Dahl, for it is in precisely such subjects as stewing George that Mr. Dahl excels. He is in fact a humorist whose prime speciality, in the contemporary manner, is the macabre. Many of his subjects are quite revolting, some are merely diabolically ingenious, others just plain nasty; but nearly all are very funny.

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IT is difficult to define his delightful talent and particular achievement in a few words, but anyone familiar with the work of the American cartoonist Charles Addams will understand me perfectly when I say that Mr. Dahl is, to my mind, a sort of Charles Addams of literature. "Now Kick Daddy Goodnight and Run off to Bed" has long been a favourite Addams caption of mine, and in the years to come stories such as "William and Mary" will have an honoured place beside it. This horrible little masterpiece is quite the nastiest, if not the funniest, of the lot.

"Kiss, Kiss" belongs to that category of fiction whose plots cannot be revealed; it would spoil all the gruesome fun to do so. Much of the effect of these stories depends wholly on surprise, and a good deal of the hoodwinking is done by the meticulous parade of what

appears to be highly specialised knowledge, surgery being the subject in "William and Mary," meat-canning—and what meat!—in "Pig," and the care of infants in "Royal Jelly." Among the nastier and more ingenious of the pieces is a little thing called "Edward the Conqueror," which may be safely likened to another masterpiece in revulsion, Dunsany's "Two Bottles of Relish."

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IN "Pig," a boy has just performed the ceremony of burying his grandmother at the bottom of the garden, and a subsequent brief conversation between him and the local doctor, who is surprised by the lady's demise, will give a fair example of Mr. Dahl's method:

"Certainly she's dead," the youth answered. "If you will come back home with me now I'll dig her up and you can see for yourself."

"How deep did you bury her?" the doctor asked.

"Six or seven feet down, I should think."

"And how long ago?"

"Oh! About eight hours."

"Then she's dead," the doctor announced. "Here's the certificate."

One final word of warning. Someone once said that you cannot live for ever on quince jelly (it might just as well have been royal jelly, for that matter). In other words, any attempt to gollop "Kiss, Kiss" will, in my view, result in mental biliousness. Mr. Dahl belongs very much to the take-one-at-night school: or at the outside, two. Savoured in this way "Kiss, Kiss" will give considerable delight to those who like their short stories astringent and sophisticated, diabolically ingenious, shamelessly unconventional and all wrapped up with a lovely leer.

Brief Deaths

A COMPANION TO MURDER.

By E. Spencer Shew. (Cassell. 25s.)
Notorious murderers—Crippen and Ruxton, Haigh and Christie—rub shoulders with eminent judges and advocates—Mr. Justice Avory, Patrick Hastings—in this dictionary of notable murders of the first fifty years of the century. Mr. Shew's long career as a Lobby Correspondent was preceded by a spell as a reporter during which he himself was present at a number of the trials he describes, and about which he writes with gusto.