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ited by E. B. Osborn

led NEW FICTION

An American Best-Seller Which is Also a Work of Art

By H. E. BATES

- The Outward Room, By Miller Brand. (Cassell. 7s. 6d.)
- Avalanche, By Gordon Hayward. (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.)
- The Late George Apley, By John P. Marquand. (Robert Hale. 7s. 6d.)
- Alas! Poor Lady, By Helen Ferguson. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

"THE OUTWARD ROOM" is a fine novel; it is also, in America, a best-seller. It is not so long a best-seller as Miss Woolf's, "The Waves," which now, quite appropriately perhaps but also ironically, heads the lists together with "How to Win Friends and Influence People." But it seems to me the best best-seller, in a literary sense, that has come out of America for a very long time.

Mr. Brand's story is that of a woman who, smashed up by the death of a much-loved brother, spends seven years of her life in an asylum. We see her in her room, waiting, eating, sleeping, hearing the voices of nurses and other patients and the playing of gramophone records and all the other too-familiar sounds which, after seven years, constitute for her part of a living death. We see the psychologist, Dr. Revin, putting her, with skill, patience, and tenderness, through a number of exhaustive tests, but without ultimate success. We see her increasing lack of faith in these tests and in the asylum altogether as a means of taking her back to normal life. She longs to escape. Finally, she does escape, and first by train-jumping, then by hitch-hiking, reaches New York. She pines for him there, gets a room, and tries, without success, to find work. She then meets a man, a factory worker, who offers her his room, his food, and, ultimately, the opportunity to share his life. All this time she is a creature struggling, like a chrysalid, in the darkness lying between one life and another. It is only when her lover is confronted also with a personal grief identical with her own that she finds release.

"Unflinching Delicacy . . ."

But no synopsis can do justice to "The Outward Room" as a work of art. This is a book which demands from its author from the first word to the last an unflinching delicacy of line and a method in which sentimentality, melodrama and overstatement must have no place at all. As the exponent of such a method, Mr. Brand reveals himself as a superb artist. It is a joy to see his beautifully simple and yet subtle style working out the problems of this woman's conflict with the forces inside and outside herself, and doing it all the time without trickery or sloppiness, but with the profoundest tenderness and truth. The book is mastered at every point. If it could have been better done, I have no notion who, among living writers, could have done it.

If such praise fails to impress on you the merits of "The Outward Room," read "Avalanche." In Mr. Hayward's book you have a kind of companion volume to Mr. Brand's. The asylum in America is replaced by a sanatorium in Switzerland; the woman by a young man suffering from tuberculosis. And where is the clear, never-flicking light of Mr. Brand's style is, or it was, focused on a single life, Mr. Hayward's sheds a far softer, far less clear glow on many. We see the young man himself; the beautiful dying Austrian girl to whom the young Cockney is teaching English ("Oh gave the baby some bread and butter"); the Teufelberg ("the most perfectly put together bit of human property"); Germaine ("very feminine, very French, and, above all, very wise"); the Countess Nadia ("I need hardly say that I do not attempt to describe her kiss"); the padre, Miss Lindsay, and, in fact, most of the other important people at the sanatorium of Ravila. All these people are put before us with that gentle, slightly melancholic humour that characterises many novels of sanatorium life. In fact, this book is, in parts, extraordinarily funny. It is never sordid. But in recommending it I can only add that it stands as far apart from Mr. Brand as Switzerland from New York.

In a New Form?

"THE LATE GEORGE APLEY" has swept America. It is a book belonging to the "after his death the manuscript came into my hands" class. On top of this Mr. Marquand has the very naive, very American presumption to call it "a novel in a new form." Actually it is the story, in memoir form, of an eminent Bostonian, George Apley, who lived from 1868 to 1933, and through whose eyes we see, rather as we saw through the eyes of Soames Forsyth, the gradual evolution of the great age of property and prosperity. The novel is made up of Apley's papers and letters, all written with slightly academic and urbane good taste, interspersed with comments from "the friend of the family," written, as far as I can see, in precisely the same manner. This academic correctness of style is intended to be a commentary on the man and his time, and certain American critics have described the book as very funny. To my mind the late George Apley is a bit of a stuffed owl.

Books have a way of falling into pairs, and Miss Ferguson's book matches in some ways Mr. Marquand's, although it is the better novel. In "Alas! Poor Lady" we follow, over almost the same period of time (1870-1936), the fortunes of Grace Scrimgeour, elegantly brought up in the comforts and niceties of Victorian South Kensington. Hemmed in on all sides by a kind, foolish family who have no ambition for her except matrimony, this poor creature is pitched out into a world for which she is hopelessly unfit, to drift as an underpaid and incompetent governess from one genteel post to another, until she comes at last to "The Distressed Gentlemen Protection Association."

Miss Ferguson has written here a long rather untidy book in which her alert wit seems, at times, to get a little weary. But her picture of this pitiful distressed gentlewoman is out of life, and poor Grace Scrimgeour will find a fuller, and to my mind better-deserved, response in English readers than the prosperous George Apley.

The first three volumes of a new series of reprints, called Great Explorations, have now been published. These are Burton's "PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA AND MEDINA," Livingstone's "TRAVELS AND RESEARCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA," and—perhaps most interesting because least known to the general reader—"TRAVELS IN TARTARY AND TURKEY," by Albin Hue (Herbert Joseph, 5s. each). It is rather a pity that they are presented without notes and without better maps. The narratives have been selectively shortened, but there is nothing to indicate where the cuts have been made.



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