
THE NEW NOVELS

SOME books demand a second reading almost at once; *Friends and Relations* by Elizabeth Bowen does. (Dial Press. \$2.00.) If one turns back from the end to go through it again not a moment will have been wasted and a humility at first devastating but eventually wholesome will be the result. Before many pages have been reread it becomes apparent that Miss Bowen has not been over-subtle; it is we who have been dull. If we had been willing at the outset to take every word she has put down at face value the whole story would have been there for us, unmistakable, honestly foreshadowed within the first chapter. In rather sullen self-defense we can only plead that for years we have been victimized by novelists even duller than we, so bewildered by crowds of details that mean nothing, clues trailing into thin air, circumstances and conversations spun out for no better reason than that the author felt desperately that *something* must be done to make us believe the tale could have been true, that when Miss Bowen offers us a novel we victimize her in turn, scampering over what we fear may be padding, wary of being deluded again by a false clue, only to find that she meant exactly what she was saying, in every well written sentence.

The story is made from the consequences of a light woman's taking a lover. You are not asked to believe that if Lady Elfrida had for once in her trivial life foregone the thing she wanted all the lives bound up with hers would have been perfect. The author only asks you to believe, offering almost irrefut-

able proof in every case, that several people could have been better and happier if the mistake had not been made. With a sure and delicate feeling for personal responsibility, Miss Bowen has completely skirted the temptation to make Elfrida the universal scapegoat for all the errors and unhappiness that her other characters are called on to endure. "To explain" does not equal "to absolve" anywhere in this author's sensitive vocabulary. Nor does she, to prove her case, bring lives and homes crashing down in ruins. Starting with normally courageous people she leaves them making a great deal out of marriages that should never have been undertaken, getting much from relations which must always be incomplete.

To tell even this much of the story is to do the book a grave disservice. No synopsis can give any idea of the poignance without bathos or the wit without cynicism of *Friends and Relations*. I think I laughed outright oftener in reading it than in reading any current "humorous" book. This wit is as fundamental and as moving as many of Miss Bowen's less celebrated but even more valuable qualities. It arises, as in actual living, not in spite of but because of the gravity of the issue, at the moment when the warding-off, the feint, the sidestep, is the only alternative to facing the intolerable truth.

Perhaps the most triumphant piece of artistry in the novel is the character of Theodora. Miss Bowen will not allow you to hate Elfrida, nor her pitifully charming, tiresomely

hypersensitive son, nor even "Uncle Con-sidine", the co-respondent in that old scandalous catastrophe; but in Theodora, caught almost fortuitously into the plot, she draws you such a figure of perverse, malignant, ugly and unflagging jealousy that to hate her comes to seem like an exercise of the higher faculties. And by thus letting Theodora down into the story like a string about which all darker emotions can crystallize, Miss Bowen is able to draw her out again at the end, leaving admiration and pity unclouded.

It may be that a better English novel is being written at this moment than *Friends and Relations*; in that case it is very likely that Miss Bowen is writing it.

The difficulty with reporting on Sigrid Undset's *The Wild Orchid* (Knopf. \$2.50) is that it is so obviously the first half of a two-part novel that any decision on it will have to be tentative. It is full of excellences, but all the lives and situations in it are held suspended at the end.

Paul Selmer, its young hero, is the eldest son of a divorced couple. His mother was a free-thinker of the eighties, full of the intoxicating notion that "reason" and "science" will lead us ultimately to the truth. It is when Paul learns that the divorce was really "on principle" that his maturity begins. Reasonably enough he had believed that Julie's lack of animus against his father and his father's second wife sprang from her chivalry. When at last, battling earnestly to convince him, his mother succeeds in making him realize that she left her husband and took his children away from him not because she was too deeply wounded by infidelity to continue to live with him, but because he was a slow-thinking, conservative bourgeois, the entire foundation on which Paul had started to build his life must be relaid.

It is almost unbelievable to him that for the reasons she has given him his mother was willing to break up a home, make a manless refuge for her children, rob his father of his sons and daughter, and throw the elder Selmer family into confusion. (As soon as his father remarried a kindly, florid, unexact woman, Selmer's family assumed, exactly as young Paul had assumed, that only Julie's chivalry had kept her from charging him with infidelity, and her short martyrdom was over.) Neither is Paul able to convince his mother that he has any cause for his distress and dismay. Poor Julie is perfectly drawn—her emotional thinking which she mistakes for reason, her passionate conviction that she is in the vanguard of truth, her free-thinking aphorisms which have grown so stale in twenty years of parroting that not even young Paul can help finding them funny, the little home she made, full of ingenuous artistic effects, truly comfortable and clean and pretty but, first and most important of all, as complete an antithesis to the heavy carpets and curtains and upholstered furniture of the bourgeoisie as she could make it. Julie is really alert, eager, affectionate, intelligent and pathetically silly, and her son comes to see her that way.

The rest of the book is about Paul's first abortive adventure into love, his wavering approach to Roman Catholicism, his eventual marriage to a shallow little thing, and the birth of his daughter. Without overemphasizing, Fru Undset shows that Paul has had all he can stand of strong-mindedness in women, and in his recoil he chooses first Lucy, below him in class, almost totally lacking in intellect, pretty, sensual and prudish, incapable of either fidelity or trust, and then Björg, childish, vain and opinionated, quite as tragic a choice as Lucy had been.

The story is told against the background

of Norway in the years of its breaking away from Sweden, giving Julie a cruel opportunity to show her illogical emotion and to defend it passionately as consistent and reasonable, and giving the lovers the threat of war to heighten their relation. The Catholics whom Paul meets in his pilgrimage toward maturity are brought in casually, almost accidentally, yet on the whole they seem the most important factors in his growth. They are almost too universally serene and stable, yet each is drawn as recognizably individual.

If this novel is somewhat disappointing to those who admired Sigrid Undset's great books of mediæval Norway, it may be because she has conceded too much to our age. *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestviken* are epic dramas of conscience. But sin, repentance and redemption are hard words for the twentieth-century tongue; we use them awkwardly or without conviction when speaking about our contemporaries. Fru Undset knows this, and has either hesitated to confront us with them or has herself felt that they were out of key. As a consequence *The Wild Orchid* has not the intensity of her mediæval sagas; but it is possible that its sequel, *The Burning Bush*, which must inevitably treat of Paul's conversion to Roman Catholicism, may bring the completed novel back into the true Undset line.

Not one of the people at Miss Kennedy's country week-end in *Return I Dare Not* (Doubleday, Doran. \$2.50) came out of simple friendliness. Every one of them had some ax to grind. There was the boy playwright who had discovered that his natural amiability was such an asset in his already phenomenal career that he had to go and be charming to the right woman even when he was on the verge of a break-down from sleeplessness. There was the titled and aging beauty

who could still recruit lovers because she was influential. There was a publisher and his young wife, the young wife bored with years of fidelity and child-raising and on the point of putting her nonsensical libertarian talk into action, with the boy playwright as the beneficiary. There was the literary man about town who played the bachelor by suppressing his shabby-genteel household completely, and had come to the house party because it was the right thing to do. There are half a dozen other slightly shop-worn and self-seeking adults, none of whom gets what he came for. And there are, since this is a book by Margaret Kennedy, two adolescent girls who are charming, delicious, straightforward, disciplined, severe, truthful, pure of motive and of heart.

It becomes increasingly clear that Miss Kennedy's message to us is that an adolescent shall lead us. These two girls have more than a touch of that obnoxious Wordsworthian infant who was being a seer blest at an age when he had no business to be anything but a nuisance. All the noble traits are saved up for them (and for a poet, dead before the story begins, who was starkly faithful to his vision). Hugo Pott, the boy playwright (who, since he is only in his twenties, still trails some tatters of glory), is allowed to see the light at the instigation of the elder adolescent and to go off in the opposite direction from the rest of the party at its breaking-up, with the prospect of poetry, obscurity and Marianne before him as a glittering reward. I feel very unregenerate about Hugo Pott. He had had a shoddy, dull childhood, and I couldn't help wishing that he hadn't seen that London drawing-rooms and country week-ends were just so much dust and ashes quite so soon. I should like to have had him fooled a little longer into thinking it was great fun to be a darling of the gods, but

no doubt that is because I have lost the clear vision of nineteen, and in any case it isn't important. This is a book for diversion, and it diverts. Many a mother will enjoy Marianne's straightforward nobility and turn right around to tell her own youthful goddess not to make an intolerant nuisance of herself when she has no comprehension of the complicated problems of maturity. But I recommend hiding it from everyone under twenty, because although Miss Kennedy has had the grace to make her youngsters really uproariously and unintentionally funny now and again, she actually worships these charming geese.

Grace Zaring Stone's new book, *The Almond Tree* (Bobbs-Merrill. \$2.50), has modern Washington for its setting. No one needs to be assured, since it is by the author of *The Heaven and Earth of Doña Elena* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, that it is expertly written. But it is rather a shock to realize, considering *The Almond Tree* in retrospect, that this book is "prettily" written—with a light, disarming touch quite out of keeping with its theme, which is selfishness.

It opens with the reunion of the three middle-aged Gentry sisters, whose family had been transplanted to the Capitol from a simple and neighbourly community in the interests of the father's political career. One sister is unmarried—a handsome, domineering, sentimental woman who devotes her life to keeping the home as "Mamma" would have had it; the second is divorced, sterile and restless, a true prude in spite of the tricks of sophistication she has been able to pick up; the youngest a recently bereaved widow, who has returned with her sixteen-year-old daughter from Europe, still too dazed with grief to resent her sisters' affectionate but tactless efforts to arrange her life.

Within a short time Mrs. Stone has established the fact that the two older sisters are complete emotional cowards, willing to meet human claims only so long as they are kept childish and unexacting. For a while Leda, the widowed sister, is indecipherable. She is introduced while she is still in a trance of unhappiness, but since she was capable of an enduring marriage, and an "ideal" one, the reader feels that she at least may be free from the blight of pathological selfishness. In the end it is Leda who fails most catastrophically. It becomes plain that there had been something morbid about the love between her and her husband: Marise, their daughter, hardly existed for them at all. They were kind to her, they "loved" her, but all their real emotion was confined to each other. Leda, left alone with her daughter, seems always on the point of becoming aware of her as a person with a life of her own, with legitimate claims on her mother for guidance and encouragement. But years of irresponsibility have left Leda unfitted to feel more than a momentary tender compunction whenever she fails Marise—as she does again and again. At last, still beautiful, still "aphrodisian" (to use Mrs. Stone's word) at forty-four, still needing fuel for her vanity, she marries a young lieutenant, never realizing that Marise loves him and that he had been caught in a dilemma between mother and daughter which she could easily have resolved had she not been blind. On this note of grotesque and wanton selfishness the book closes.

Good as *The Almond Tree* is, it is unsatisfactory. Not only because a story which must be a tragedy under any interpretation is told in a tone of social comedy, but because Mrs. Stone never makes it plain what she intended her book to imply. All contentions to the contrary notwithstanding, the title is of very little help. In Mrs. Stone's two previous books

the setting was important to the story. Are we meant to gather that we are children playing at government, and that our personal lives show the same childishness? Is the author saying that the Gentrys might have flourished normally in their middle-Western home, but that uprooted and set down in Washington they were doomed to sterility? Or, if Washington has no significance one way or the other, perhaps some theory of parent-fixation seemed to Mrs. Stone to be illustrated by her allegory, a theory which remains dark to the reader. *The Almond Tree* seems to me a good book which falls just short of being a good novel.

It is a little difficult to take Evelyn Scott's two-volume epic of sex in America after the Civil War quite so seriously as it was meant to be taken. If half that she says in *A Calendar of Sin* (Cape & Smith. \$5.00) about our ancestors' ineptitude at love were true, this continent, in even a paltry sixty-three years, would be populated almost entirely by the offspring of hardier and less genteel races. In the words of one reviewer who accepts Miss Scott's thesis, "Murder, rape, self-mutilation, sadism and suicide were the necessary products of any society which systematically distorted its erotic energies . . ." And indeed, if murder, rape, self-mutilation, sadism and suicide had taken a toll throughout our society proportionate to their havoc in the five generations of Miss Scott's narrative, then doubtless an appalled remnant of the American settlers would badly need this thundering tract in behalf of taking love easy.

But most of us, I suspect, had immediate forebears who had enough commonsense and affection to live down whatever initial pruderies they may have had and emerge into happy marriage, and we are bound to read Miss Scott with a sceptical eye. The book has

plenty of virtues; the two sets of characters, for all their likeness to refined branches of the Kallikaks and the Jukes, are most astonishingly alive, and Miss Scott re-creates the atmosphere of her changing periods more than satisfactorily. If there were one grain of humour anywhere in the *Calendar's* pages, or if the untenable thesis could occasionally be forgotten for a chapter, these two volumes might be recommended to adults who like "strong" reading.

Parkhurst Whitney, on the other hand, has written in *Time Exposure* (Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.00) a story which might go far in counteracting the effects of *A Calendar of Sin* if it could have some circulation. Unfortunately it was turned out in a dust-jacket aimed at the shop-girl trade; it will be a great victory for merit if it manages to find its audience.

It is the story of a lower middle-class American marriage which began with an elopement in the year 1900. Fannie, in Miss Scott's hands, would have been headed for certain disaster, for she is a prude of the first water and came from a matriarchal home. Chester is the average sensual man of any period, who has very little trouble coming to terms with his instincts. The marriage was nearly wrecked on the reefs of Fannie's "niceness", but it won through. Fannie becomes neither insane nor melancholy, and Chester is left on the verge of making a fortune; and if the author meant Chester's natural nose for money to be an indication that he was starved and thwarted in his emotional life (according to the most popular current theory about money-making), he should have made the fact considerably plainer.

Mr. Whitney's memory for old slang, old customs, old enthusiasms is astonishing. *Time Exposure* is far too modest a title. This

is no mere photograph of girls in pompadours and men in stiff high collars. There is hardly a dialogue in the book that does not proceed from bromide to bromide; forgotten clichés sound again; bright young men find a whole range of satisfactory expression between slang and platitude. But each of them uses the right slang just in the right place; their platitudes

carry their real convictions. By his subtle use of unsubtle material Mr. Whitney has brought a gallery of American bourgeois portraits back to life, showing the originals as men and women who were inarticulate, ambitious, half-educated, loving, humorous, intolerant and loyal. I hope he will write more novels.

DOROTHEA BRANDÉ

IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING by
Maurice Baring (KNOFF. \$3.75)

MR. BARING'S is the third book on Mary Queen of Scots, to be published this year. It differs from the others in that it is in novel, or rather short story, form, and purports to be the life of Mary Stuart told in turn by each of her four Marys—Mary Fleming, Mary Beton, Mary Livingstone, and Mary Seton. The stories of Mary Fleming and Mary Seton take the Queen up to her flight after the Battle of Langside, while the other two end with her incarceration in Lochleven. There is as a postscript a supposed report by Jane Kennedy to Mary Seton in which the Queen's death and funeral is narrated. Mr. Baring's book gives no new material and is chiefly of interest because of its author's masterly evocation of the writing style of the period. It is in short neither a novel nor a real biography, but rather a *tour de force*. Yet it has its interest beyond this. The story of Mary is told from four different angles, and nearly everything in each of the stories is contained in the others, yet such is the fascination of the story itself that it amply bears its four-fold repetition. The picture which Mr. Baring gives of Mary is practically that given in Justice Parry's recent volume, though in Mary Beton's account there is a hint that perhaps the Queen returned d'Anville's love more completely than is believed

by some of her partisans. Yet on the whole the Mary Stuart of the book is a woman whose charm and beauty were well matched by the freedom of her spirit, and the generosity of her nature. It is not an important book but it is a charming one.

GRENVILLE VERNON

MAID IN WAITING by *John Galsworthy*
(SCRIBNER'S. \$2.50)

THOUGH this is Mr. Galsworthy's first long fiction since *Swan Song*, it adds little to his great reputation. Perhaps the decline perceptible throughout the two trilogies may be attributed to this novelist's failure to solve the contemporaneous riddle as easily as the late Victorian and the pre-War. But in all fairness we must remember that Mr. Galsworthy at his second-best exceeds most writers at their best. After all, *The Man of Property* is hardly to be duplicated.

The story concerns English men and women of the usual Galsworthian grade. The Charwells resemble the Forsytes; Fleur and the Monts come in as secondary characters. The maid in waiting is Dinny Charwell, a thoroughly intelligent, witty and charming heroine, who interests herself in the predicaments of those she loves and who neglects her own lovers. Her brother Hubert has got in a mess over a Bolivian expedition; he is much more of a static character than his en-