

Faulkner's Double Novel

THE WILD PALMS. By William Faulkner. New York: Random House. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

THE spreading title of Mr. Faulkner's latest "novel" shelters not one story but two. We may owe this to the author's generosity or to his sense of economy, or the combination may represent an artist's sincere experiment in narrative form; but one reviewer, at least, finds it impossible to agree with the publishers' statement that "In this novel Faulkner orchestrates, in two parallel stories, the major themes of flight and refuge." The stories are related only by the physical device of printing them in alternating sections between the same covers, and there is no evidence of orchestration. The theme in each case is that of flight. Charlotte and Harry seek to escape from the world into a warm and private hay-mow of physical love; the nameless convict, who has been carried to freedom by a Mississippi flood, escapes from the responsibilities of life by a voluntary return to his prison haven.

The bare bones of Charlotte's and Harry's story are familiar enough, as the skeleton of any love story must be. A married woman falls in love with a bachelor, and for him deserts her husband and two children; the lovers pit the strength of their passion against the world, and, at the last, pay in full for what once would have been called their sin. Similar plots—under such titles as "All For Love; or The Price They Paid," and "The Errant Wife; or Why Did She Do It?"—flourished among the paperbacks that littered our attics in the nineties. But now they flourish with what a difference! The "modern" novelist has put the asterisks of his grandfathers on a paying basis; with his candid camera and his scalpel and his psychoanalytic science, he spares neither his characters, nor himself, nor his readers anything. The body's once sacred precincts, the mind's darkest recesses, are his happy hunting ground. As a result of his newly acquired license, he can bombard his public with a series of galvanizing charges that were, only yesterday, morally and legally taboo. He can do this for the sake of literature, or for the sake of rank sensationalism. In the past, at times, William Faulkner has skidded from the higher to the lower level. But in his telling of the story of Henry Wilbourne and Charlotte Rittenmeyer—despite the shock-tactics that he employs, the chances that he takes, and the slippery path he treads—he does not skid. It is a love story that kindles our imagination, persuades our reason, and leaves us emotionally shaken.

It is all, of course, a little larger than life, and in a way simpler; more intense than normal experience, and at times

tangential to common reality. Faulkner's characters are always more or less out of the ordinary focus—sometimes, for the ordinary eye, they are fatally so—and their creator has been known to set the frontiers of a private world, emotional and intellectual, between himself and the generality of his readers, leaving them to the sad reflection that without understanding there can be no belief. But here he indulges in no such flight.

Charlotte is the kind of heroine who is dear to novelists who live by their brains: a woman of sex all compact, irresistible in her sexual drive, ruthless in her urgency. She is perhaps an exaggeration, an ideal, a symbol; but she is understandable, as is Harry, who is caught up in the whirlpool of her compulsions and with her swept to destruction. We come to believe in this man and this woman; at each stage of their journey, our participation in their emotional and



Decoration by Rudolph Schwartz

psychic life is more nearly complete and more deeply felt, until, finally, we are ready to experience the full impact of their journey's ending—a tragedy not quite concluded, and, so long as memory endures in one of them, not wholly tragic. We believe, too, in Charlotte's husband, whose own compulsions are far from stereotyped but entirely comprehensible. He is an original creation, finely realized.

Compared to the lovers' drama, the story of the nameless convict and the Mississippi flood (despite the violence of the raging waters and the convict's physical exploits: exploits that would make Paul Bunyan recognize in him at least a baby brother) is strangely monochordic, calm, and undisturbing. The descriptions of things seen and actions performed are vividly successful; the author makes us see what he would have us see. But the communication of emotion is comparatively meager, and the flouting of physical probability sometimes suggests that we should read the tale as an allegory rather than as a factual narrative designed to convince and move us.

The two tales are separate and self-

sufficient, distinct and individual in matter, in manner, in spirit, and in time. A decade lies between the action of one and that of the other. It may be claimed that a certain vague irony is achieved by their juxtaposition, but a similar effect could be produced by printing together in similar fashion—to take only one possible pair—Benjamin Constant's "Adolphe" and Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat." Some readers may find it an exhilarating game to straddle the backs of two stories simultaneously; others may feel that the exercise is merely annoying and unnecessary. For my part, I am convinced that neither story gains anything from the enforced union, and I am fairly sure that both are losers. The emotional sweep of the one is interrupted by the almost purely physical action of the other; and the final phase of the convict's history is less compelling than it would have been had it not been made to follow one of the most powerful and affecting scenes, or series of scenes, that William Faulkner has ever written. However, neither tale by itself would have sufficed for a "full-length" book; and Mr. Faulkner has a weakness for novelty for its own sake. So, as matters stand, the publishers have their book and the author has his novelty.

William Faulkner's style has seldom served him better than it has in many passages of this novel. It often serves him badly, and he would do well to note the fact. Too often he displays a perverse liking for syntactical complexity; for a needless, unorganized, and unrewarding complexity. The thirty-five-line-long sentence that begins on page 23, and the second paragraph on page 130, are only two examples of what I mean. The disjointed clauses and outrageous parentheses, the suspended and fractured meanings, are an affront to both eye and ear. Complexity is excusable only when complex ideas require expression, and even then an author's refusal to organize his thought is inexcusable. Logan Pearsall Smith has recently deplored the piece-of-string sentences with which so many writers now content themselves. Mr. Faulkner, contemptuous of mere string-lengths, flies to the opposite extreme and produces what may be called the duffel-bag sentence: into it he chucks anything and everything, helter-skelter, pulls the cord, and leaves to the reader the job of sorting out the contents. It is a deliberate act, not a careless one, of course. It is done for effect, but the effect does not come off and the mess remains. He fails just as conspicuously when he indulges in what must be called "fancy writing." There are numerous examples of this style in "The Wild Palms," and one need only contrast them with those other passages, in which the author has permitted simplicity to triumph, to measure the extent and cost of his wilful folly. William Faulkner has a great talent and a great deal to say. He should say it in the best way of which he is capable.

Wife and Mother

FROST FLOWER. By Helen Hull. New York: Coward-McCann. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

WHEN a novel has a wide scope the reader may rejoice and give thanks, but a wide scope is not essential to a good novel. (By "scope" I mean the range, not of incident merely, but of human emotion investigated.) A piece of fiction which probes to its depths one emotion, one human situation, may be a great work of art equally with novels of wider range, but it has a certain handicap of monotony from the point of view of the general reader.

Miss Helen Hull is a writer who adopts and accepts this handicap as a deliberate formula for her careful studies of the domestic American scene. In *"Frost Flower"* she surmounts this handicap triumphantly for those who share the one emotion investigated, less surely perhaps for those who do not. Her heroine, Phyllis Collings, is a happy wife and mother, and it is her defense of hearth and home, her essential "housewife" reaction to danger, which is the theme of the novel. This housewife note is sounded from first page to last, in a reiteration which to some will convey increasing poignancy, to others perhaps increasing irritation.

In the early stormy days of her marriage to the difficult Edwin, Phyllis took a lover, and through this passing fancy learned how permanent was her feeling for her husband. Now, twenty years later, this past infidelity threatens the whole domestic structure she has so carefully and lovingly built up. Andy's jealous widow will poison Edwin's mind, hint loss of reputation to Phyllis's friends, destroy her daughter's trust, unless Phyllis can ward off this menace, not so much from herself as from her loved ones. She springs to their defense. In my opinion her method is entirely wrong, and indeed her behavior throughout is altogether too exasperatingly conscious; she continually asks herself, for instance, whether she has used "the right tone," and such questions in themselves are liable to destroy trust in their asker's sincerity. But Miss Hull has, of course, the right to study such a type if she chooses; and this portrait of a modern housewife, 1939 vintage, though not perhaps very subtle, is accurate, detailed, and entertaining. The rest of the characters are lightly but adequately sketched; the fine old father, the harassed brother, the vampire sister-in-law, the two college-age children. Edwin would be more interesting than any of them, we feel, if we were allowed to know him better.

Incidentally, what a feminist tract could be made of this novel! "Extraordinary," muses Phyllis, "the unconscious

and unflagging surveillance a family kept upon its wife and mother." It is too true: the poor woman never has a moment alone in which to confront her problem—even in the silent watches of the night Edwin's toothache demands her attention. And of course dear Edwin cannot get through his toothache without Phyllis; nobody in the house can get through anything without Phyllis. The salad, the coffee, Jack's driving, Edwina's morals, the Major's heart attacks, Edwin's in-

feriority complex, the maid's sulks: these and all other details of "the intricate task of relationship" chez Collings, depend on her; she is the pillar of the house, the Wife and Mother. We watch her defense of her complex position with sympathy and suspense, even with affection, while wishing that she had more time to devote to her own soul. The solution of her problem does not shirk reality, but it does, I think, shirk the deep emotions on which surface realities are based.

Phyllis Bentley, author of *"Inheritance," "Sleep in Peace,"* and other novels of England, is now in this country on a lecture tour.

Narrowing Horizons

THE DEATH OF THE HEART. By Elizabeth Bowen. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1939. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GEORGE DANGERFIELD

JOHN STRACHEY has already, in the pages of this magazine, called this remarkable novel a description "of the banality and despair of the English middle class." Banality is a strong word, despair a stronger one; yet, on the evidence which a series of novelists has submitted to us, they do not seem inappropriate. Whatever his faults, the English novelist is anything but insensitive. Preoccupied for the most part with middle class life, he has produced over the past ten years the portrait of a class whose horizons have narrowed around it like a prison. It is the portrait of some collective ego, turning round and round upon itself like a whirlpool, and throwing up as it turns a brief spray of vitality and hope.

"The Death of the Heart" is one of the most conscious of these novels. Miss Bowen has achieved the emphatic feat of being at once detached from and submerged in the life that she describes. She sees it as something complacent, resigned, malign, and futile; she sees it also as striving not to be any of these things. She does not blame the individual human being, and so her characters have not the unconvincing appearance of people already condemned. They continue to exist as best they can, they try to be nice, but they form a hopeless pattern.

Portia Quayne, a girl of sixteen, who has spent her life moving to and fro in the hinterland of Riviera hotels, at length an orphan, comes to stay with her upper-middle-class relatives in London. Nothing in her unconcentrated past has prepared her for this experience. She is innocent and hopeful; she expects that when life offers, it offers to lead somewhere. In the Quayne household she is to learn that it leads nowhere—or, what is worse, leads almost imperceptibly to the betrayal of confidence and love. A holiday with a somewhat lower-middle-class family by



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the sea serves to make this betrayal more absolute. It is a passage from the upper to the nether whirlpool.

A reviewer feels that he must either write a whole essay about this book, or very little. It is enough to say that Miss Bowen's observation is profound and her expression of it rotund. Taking them both together, they are almost incredible. So is her restraint. She does not commit the very venal mistake of pressing her despairing theme, like stones in the old torture, upon the chests of her characters. As a matter of fact, each one faces the succeeding days with something like hope. To this extent, all true novelists of despair must be individualists; otherwise their novels become tracts, or sermons, or elegies. Elizabeth Bowen does not celebrate dying individuals, but a dying era; and her discrimination in this respect is so nice that "The Death of the Heart" must be called, not merely the finest of her novels, but one of the finest, one of the deepest, (and, to be honest, one of the most depressing) of contemporary English novels.