

Condition, Conduct, Consequence

"The Enchantress and Other Stories," by H. E. Bates (*Atlantic-Little, Brown*. 206 pp. \$4), play variations on the theme of human understanding vs. moral judgment. Irving H. Buchen is a member of the English faculty at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey.

By Irving H. Buchen

IN THE Thirties, when H. E. Bates was an angry young Englishman, he proclaimed in a brief essay on Hardy and Conrad: "Morality is virtually a fraud, since there is really no stabilized coinage of morality at all but only the elemental currency of human action and re-action, only human conduct and its consequences." Bates was then fighting for a fiction that would display moral judgments not as something obviously superior to, but as something imperceptibly imbedded in the human condition. Throughout his writing career this has remained his central artistic aim. Happily, this new collection of short stories has the same distinguished focus.

Perhaps the title story, "The Enchantress," best suggests the extent to which the vital relationship between human conduct and morality is contingent upon the reader's own awareness. The "enchantress," Bertha Jackson, born and raised in the slums, marries a fairly wealthy man old enough to be her grandfather. We rapidly conclude that the old man is a fool and that Bertha is a gold-digger. Bates evidently knows his readers well, for he has other characters come to the same hasty, cynical conclusion. Having set the trap, he springs it, catching and embarrassing them and us with this simple observation: "When a man of seventy marries a girl of seventeen . . . it never seems to occur to anyone that all that has possessed him is a firm dose of taste, enterprise and common sense." And, far from being a social climber, Bertha makes her husband happy, and others after him, by her enchanting gift of selfless adoration. Or, as Bates neatly puts it, "Bertha never dispossessed anybody of anything."

At least three other stories, "Lost Ball," "The Spring Hat," and "An Is-

land Princess," also deal with the losses in understanding that often follow upon mechanical and narrowing moral judgments. In fact, all twelve tales in this volume are variations on this theme. Appropriately, those that achieve an unforgettable poignancy have as their central characters individuals who live on the periphery of life. Clara Corbett of "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal" is such a character. A butcher's wife, she enjoys a momentary liberation of soul before she sinks back into the drudgery of delivering neatly wrapped cuts of meat in an old van. Then there is Thelma in the story of the same name, a bedroom maid whose life is measured out, not in coffee spoons, but in cans of hot shaving

water which she doles out every morning to lonely traveling salesmen. She falls in love with one, but when he fails to return she spends the rest of her life giving herself to other salesmen, imagining all the time that it is her beau who is really making love to her.

Significantly, these and the other stories in this volume are moving precisely because they are not pointed with any heavy-handed moralism. In fact, the key to Bates's achievement is his lightness of touch. His characters never crowd or crush the reader. They emerge casually, considerately, as if starting off a long distance away and slowly walking toward us. Their problems and conflicts never thunder or crackle noisily; they are treated by Bates with quiet respect, almost with reverence. And yet, our final impression is of an artistic world surprisingly powerful, rich, and full. Equally as important, we find that Bates has granted the same extended breadth to our understanding of human conduct and its moral consequences.

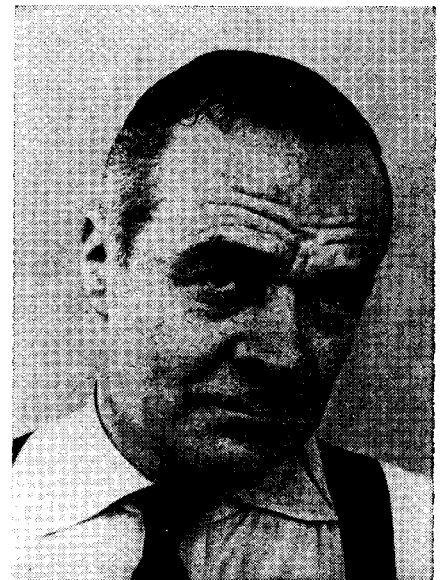
A Case of Mistaken Identity

"A Man in a Mirror," by Richard Llewellyn (*Doubleday*. 432 pp. \$5.75), demonstrates the seemingly unbridgeable gulf of misunderstanding that separates white settlers and native tribesmen in Africa. Novelist Peter Abrahams, himself born in South Africa, is the author of "Wild Conquest."

By Peter Abrahams

I SUPPOSE it is true to say that in a sense all literature is sociology; but all sociology is not literature. This was the dominant thought in my mind after reading Richard Llewellyn's latest novel, and there was something saddening about it.

Very many years ago I read another piece of sociology by Mr. Llewellyn, and it was a thing of beauty on the growing up of a young boy in the green valleys of his beloved Wales. There was a singing poetry about that story that lifted it far above sociology and made it stir the heart of a black boy in Africa. "A Man in a Mirror," on the other hand, is competent, well-handled sociology, written with a greater stylistic mastery than "How Green Was My Valley," but lacking in



—Bob Towers

Richard Llewellyn—" . . . well-handled sociology."

the inner poetry that makes literature.

The story is of Nterenke of the Masai, known as James Teren to the white folk, who, with the exception of one semi-villainous American, are all called Europeans whether they were born in Europe or not (this is the language of the white settler in Africa). The plot is very simple. Nterenke is

one of the few educated Masai, and he serves as interpreter at the trial of a fellow Masai for the murder of a white man who had taken a white cow. According to tribal belief, the cow was really the Masai's sister, and so he killed the man who had tried to take her away. But the "Europeans" could not understand this; to them it was simply wilful murder.

This business of the whites just not understanding what is so very clear to the Masai, plus the advice of the barrister who had been especially flown out from England to defend the murderer, sets Nterenke off on a short flashback in body and mind. This gives Mr. Llewellyn his opportunity to instruct us in the intricacies of Masai tribal culture, and a pretty fine job he does of it.

The author has obviously gone to great pains to capture both the facts and the flavor of the daily life of the Masai; he pays great attention to detail, and catches even the flow of their speech.

Like so many white settlers, though with greater subtlety than most, Mr. Llewellyn makes it clear that he has very little time for the Kikuyu; and somehow in the process of narration his hero, Nterenke, who is to be the Masai's prime minister when they make a bid for independence, assumes some of the whites' dislike and distrust and fear of the Kikuyu. The hint is there, shadowlike, that the Masai might have to fight the Kikuyu for their independence; and the author and all the whites will be on the side of the Noble Savages against the "tricky Kukes" who were responsible for the Mau Mau horrors. On the rare occasions when a Kikuyu or other non-Masai African appears in the story, it is in a light not half so glowing.

There are moments when the reader may find himself emotionally involved in the tale. One such moment occurs when Nterenke explains to the lawyer that the murderer was really protecting his sister, the white cow, from the white man he killed. There is another when the hero meets two very Westernized young Masai women who shed their Westernism like discarded dresses and become his tribal wives. But in the main this book is a solid dose of sociology, skilfully constructed in the shape of fiction but without its self-sustaining life.

DECLINE AND FALL: Winston Dangerfield, "great American author"; his mistress Lucha and his son David; critics, doctors, friends, and foes; a party; a sumptuous home, a swimming pool; a novel entitled "The Prelate,"
(Continued on page 82)

PERSONAL HISTORY

Velvet Suits and Pistol Practice

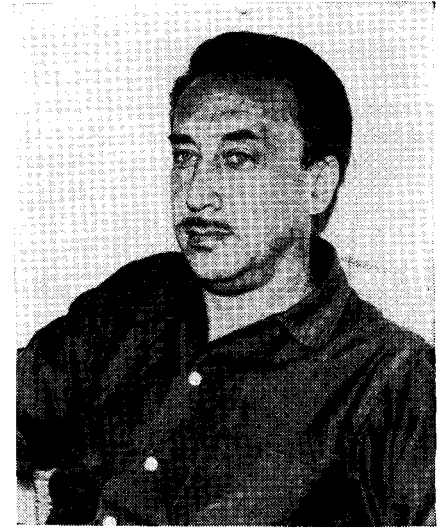
"Promise at Dawn," by Romain Gary, translated by John Markham Beach (Harper. 337 pp. \$5), pays tribute to the novelist-diplomat's extraordinary mother, who shaped his career without breaking his spirit. Thomas E. Cooney teaches English at Columbia University.

By Thomas E. Cooney

SUPPOSE a man were to tell a psychoanalyst this story: "I never knew my father. I was brought up entirely by my mother, who was a *couturière*, and I spent much of my boyhood in her shop, petted by her women customers and admired by her seamstresses. She dressed me in velvet suits and taught me to be her cavalier. So fiercely possessive was her love that even now, twenty years after she died, I tread the road she pointed out to me." One can easily imagine the analyst leaning back, making a five-pointed arch with his fingers, and saying, "Mm? So? There seems to be material for analysis here, does there not?"

The trouble with this picture is that the confrontation will never take place. Romain Gary, diplomat and author of "The Roots of Heaven," "A European Education," and other novels, whose considerably more complex life includes the above facts, has no intention of going to an analyst. In fact, he eloquently denounces "those wriggling little suckers of the human soul," and in the rest of his book shows that the gloomy poetry of psychoanalysis has nothing to say to him. Translated with lightness and grace by John Markham Beach, his narrative tells of his own fulfillment of the carefully and passionately pursued destiny his mother had mapped out for him, and does it with all the honesty of Rousseau, and with humor and whimsical self-mockery as well.

It took eight years for Mme. Kacew, sometime actress in Moscow, to migrate with her fatherless boy away from the Russian Revolution, through Vilna and Warsaw, and eventually to France. Having settled in Nice, she was determined to turn "Romouchka" into not just a Frenchman, but an ambassador of France and a modern Balzac (having due regard for that man's genius



Romain Gary—"the honesty of Rousseau."

both as a writer and a lover). And in this she proved herself to be a superb plastic artist, molding the mind and spirit of a human being into a rare and not inconsiderable work of art: a man. Velvet suits and mother-love notwithstanding, Mme. Kacew felt that a man should be able to ride, to shoot, to dance, to charm, and above all to fight for the honor of a lady or a nation. Systematically, therefore, she hired "professors" like Lieutenant Sverdlovski in Vilna to teach her son riding, fencing, and pistol-shooting, and made him defend her own honor by publicly berating and slapping the "bourgeois bedbugs" in Vilna and Nice who had insulted her. That Mme. Kacew undoubtedly provoked these insults by her own arrogance made the boy's training all the more severe; the principle of loyalty was at stake, not abstract justice.

As Romain grew up and went to war, the pattern of his mother's devotion expanded to guide him. Eventually he became a navigator and an officer in the Free French Air Force, to whose ranks he was drawn by de Gaulle's famous appeal from England in 1940, for which his mother had been preparing him all his life. Unfortunately, her last magnificent gesture cannot even be hinted at here without destroying the book's noble climax. Mme. Kacew was more than a remarkable woman. As Romain was no Oedipus, so she was no Jocasta. She was a force of nature.