

The Deceptive Facade

The Collected Stories of Jean Stafford (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 463 pp. \$10), grouped into four geographical areas, rely on sensibility rather than artifices of fiction to achieve their effect. Robert Maurer is chairman of the Literature Department at Antioch College.

By ROBERT MAURER

WHEN DON QUIXOTE INTERRUPTS Sancho Panza, complaining that a tale he is telling is too full of repetitions and diversions, the redoubtable Sancho defends his method simply. "The way I'm telling it," he says, "is the way all stories are told in my country. It isn't fair for your worship to ask me to get new habits." With as little fuss Jean Stafford has clung tenaciously for twenty-five years to her established short story strategies. It is as if, having long ago found her special country and habits, she too sees no use for newness. Her sense of tradition is as strong as her sense of place, and her most complete collection of stories to date, grouped into four geographical areas—abroad (Europe and the Caribbean), Boston, the West, and Manhattan—is as free of development or experiment as her earlier *Children Are Bored on Sunday* and *Bad Characters*. In view of all these performances, as solidly rock-ribbed as Sancho's, it would be as "unfair" to ask her to change as to ask him to tote his donkey.

What has made Miss Stafford one of our finest story-tellers is her singular victory of sensibility over technique. This may sound strange to those who, like myself, have always viewed her as a master of language and the subtlest points of writing. Write she can, no doubt. Nevertheless, reading through more than thirty stories from start to finish, one is struck by the relative blandness of her craft—but also by her exquisite awareness. Almost invariably when her stories succeed they do so because of the quality of her feelings, her mind, her powers of observation, her talent for remembering and evoking, her substitution of life, felt and considered, for the usual artifices of fiction. When her stories falter or fail, as they sometimes do, it is because her sensibility goes awry.

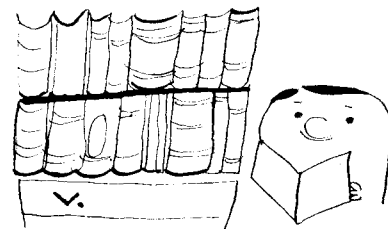
That she pulls off successes so frequently occasions surprise. Consider, for example, the sheer finicky precision of a typical first sentence: "Every morning and on alternate afternoons, Rose Fabrizio, a Mexican girl from the West, worked at a discreet girls' boarding school as secretary to the headmistress, a Miss Talmadge, who had a sweet voice." Any uninitiated reader may justifiably ask what good could come from such a start. To top it off, "The Bleeding

Heart," the title that perches daintily above that sentence, smacks of a too finely honed gentility, of a delicate woman's world, if not of a woman's magazine slickness.

Yet, mustering more forbearance than the good Quixote could for Sancho's style, one ultimately sees all this quiet façade for what it is: deceptive. Each deliciously precious detail eventually does its job. Miss Talmadge's sweet voice, it turns out, can bruise this Rose. Discretion is a snare. The reputed good breeding and upright gentlefolk of the East provide no haven for Western innocence. Cumulative experience with this writer's work shows that her sensibility is tough; it passes often beyond irony into despairing illumination; it is sometimes unexpectedly cruel, and even in its moments of humor and joy, is always worldly-wise.

"The lunatic giant in the drawing room" is the metaphor one critic, James Hall, recently used to characterize the bulk of recent American-British fiction. Ensconced in a Hepplewhite chair of social restraints, he said, is an anarchic, irrepressible self. In one form or another, the giant's image pervades these stories. Though it may seem unlikely, the turmoil and terror of personality lie close beneath the flimsy veneer of, among other stories, "Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience," "The Hope Chest," "Polite Conversation," "The Maiden," and "The Mountain Day." In the last, one of my favorites, two young lovers start the day of their engagement in an atmosphere as pristinely fresh as the air and lakes of Colorado, where the tale is set. Their

unabashed, egoistic happiness stretches beyond supportable boundaries. When the catastrophe comes, as it must, in the accidental drowning of two young servant girls, the fabric of self is rent. Family support for the grief-stricken lovers is then social, ceremonious, coming as



much from outside them as the fate that spoiled their day. But neither social comfort nor circumstantial doom can obviate their need to encounter the lunatic giant within them, which demands more self-satisfaction than it can ever deserve, or receive. "Love," the heroine concludes, "real love, is just that: it is wanting the beloved to be happy. The simplicity of the equation surprised me . . ."

This is a simple equation, one totally in tune with the basic simplicity of the tale. Yet even with many such pure successes interspersed among her works, Miss Stafford's victory over technique is in some ways no more than Pyrrhic. Second thoughts about this or any of her stories lead almost inevitably to regrets about the limited range of her strategies, and hence about her inability to explore a larger gamut of experience with larger reverberations. However much a reader may be caught up in the author's self-sustaining imaginative world, second thoughts force him to distinguish between what is truly substantial and what is merely the attraction of a captivating sensibility.

Though these tales are selected, not complete, a number pretend to be no more than they are: sketches, character studies, vignettes, brief capturings of transient moments, situations, nuances. They are deft exercises in texture that can make a soul yearn for the long-gone days of trolleys, for Christmastimes when clerks at Woolworth's still rang bells for floorwalkers. They can cause a reader to remember things he seems always to have known, but hasn't: for example, how close in a fat girl, an antiquated spinster, or an over-zealous nature lover eccentricity borders on the pathological. Other stories intend much more, and realize intentions. But perhaps because Miss Stafford has never been touched by startling fame, public expectations of range and depth have never been great upon her. She seems to have relaxed, then, with her own expectations. It is a taut relaxation always. For our part, knowing her limits and accepting them, we should settle back with the delights and rewards she offers.

FRASER YOUNG LITERARY CRYPT No. 1334

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1334 will be found in the next issue.

LOA, MDQ LD, OMW ADB KFEE
DBQHFJHEP QNP YNFEDLD-
YNPJL.

—NPMJA WOXFW QNDJPOB

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1333

The newspapers are full of what we would like to happen to us and what we hope will never happen to us.

—JOHN FOWLES.

Two Wrongs for Right

La Rhubarbe, by René-Victor Pilhes, translated from the French by Patsy Southgate and Lawrence M. Bensky (Doubleday, Paris Review Editions. 240 pp. \$4.95), a Prix Médicis winner in 1965, describes a natural son's quest for the perfect vengeance against his unnatural sire. Thomas Bishop is currently teaching a course in contemporary French literature on CBS Television's "Sunrise Semester."

By THOMAS BISHOP

"OF COURSE, BASTARDS BETRAY," says a character in Sartre's *Lucifer and the Lord*, "what else do you expect them to do?" It was one of the rare times that the existentialist author dealt so lightly with a subject which for him has important philosophic connotations, and about which he has tended to write with great seriousness. For René-Victor Pilhes bastardy becomes the non-philosophic theme of a wildly hilarious first novel, which created a stir in France (and won the Prix Médicis) when it was published there in 1965. Now, in an excellent translation by Patsy Southgate and Lawrence M. Bensky, *La Rhubarbe* should do equally well in delighting American readers. (The title, which in hazy symbolism refers to the rhubarb plants growing in the protagonist's hometown, has for some odd reason been retained in French.)

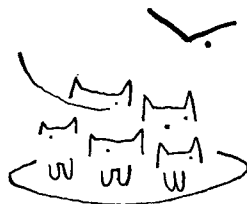
Pilhes's hero, twenty-five-year-old Urbain Gorenfan, is no ordinary bastard, and he does nothing so ordinary as to betray. The illegitimate (and unrecognized) son of a wealthy father, Mr. C., Urbain is obsessed by his unfortunate state and goes to war against the family that has renounced him. Spurred on by secret written reports sent by a mysterious stranger and by a cryptic horoscope prepared by a sleazy astrologer, he sets out first to explore the C.s, then to infiltrate them, and lastly to destroy them when he realizes that the victory he seeks is not to be accepted by them but rather to right a wrong with another wrong.

The real and imaginary events of this farcical odyssey make of *La Rhubarbe* a mirthful, rapidly paced, picaresque novel. Urbain befriends his half-sister, Beatrix, who naturally doesn't suspect for one moment that this young man is the living testimony to their father's errant past, despite the uncanny resemblance (Bourbon nose, jet-black hair) that links generations of male C.s. Urbain is able to learn through her more about the rest of the family and, most important, to imagine what his boyhood would have been like had he been recognized. These latter possibilities are ex-

plored in riotous fantasy which reaches mock-heroic proportions in the bastard's unrelenting quest for legitimacy and vengeance.

When Beatrix invites Urbain for a weekend at the C.'s mansion in Normandy, his goal seems near: he will have penetrated the fortress and will be able to confront the enemy with his startling secret. But at this point several important changes take place. Beatrix, to whom Urbain has been strongly attracted, diminishes in importance as a character, and the atmosphere of potential incest accordingly recedes. At the same time Urbain realizes that it is too late to reveal himself dramatically, that he can never hope to partake of the magic childhood he never had. In short, it is no longer of any use to him to be legitimized; the bastard needs revenge—and he finds it in a preposterous climax that brings him sweet and merited retribution.

Pilhes, who finished this novel at the age of thirty, is so skilled in telling his complex tale and especially so deft in his mocking use of language that the French critics rhapsodized ("a beginner to be ranked with the masters"). While it is true that bastardy is not every man's problem and while it is doubtful that *La Rhubarbe* will go down as one of the



significant books of the age, it will require a particularly humorless reader not to let himself be swept away by this halucinatory and uproarious epic of one man's private dilemma. For Urbain, nothing matters other than bastardy; it is his entire frame of reference. "Was she pro-bastard?" he wonders about an aunt, and when he considers the thought that his boss, too, might be illegitimate, he muses: "Could it be that Monsieur Fruhster was an executive-level bastard?"

Like Urbain, René-Victor Pilhes has a Bourbon nose and jet-black hair; like Urbain, too, he is a bastard. But, he has been careful to point out that, save for the fact of his bastardy, the events of the novel are pure imagination. I, for one, believe him with no difficulty: life is never quite that funny—not even for a bastard.

LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

1. As I Lay Dying.
2. Buried Alive.
3. Dracula.
4. Fall of House of Usher.
5. Far from the Madding Crowd.
6. Hamlet.
7. Moby Dick.
8. Oliver Twist.
9. Our Town.
10. Père Goriot.

Sufferers and Seekers

A Stronger Climate: Nine Stories, by R. Praver Jhabvala (Norton. 214 pp. \$4.95), depicts an India where nobody quite wins but foreigners always lose. Books by Margaret Parton include "The Leaf and the Flame."

By MARGARET PARTON

INDIA EITHER DEVOURS OR REJECTS the foreigner, says R. Praver Jhabvala in this new collection of nine short stories. What's more, she suggests, the rejected prolong the agony by their failure to realize their rejection; the devoured suffer because they have been consumed but never assimilated.

Mrs. Jhabvala knows what she's talking about. Born in Germany of Polish parents and educated in England, she was married in 1951 to an Indian architect, and since that time has produced three daughters, six novels, and another collection of short stories, *Like Birds, Like Fishes*. Most of her books are set in New Delhi, and most of them are like Indian saris—pure silk shot through with silver threads of wit, irony and indulgent laughter.

Not this one. The Delhi setting is there, and also the wit and irony. But (Continued on page 50)

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