ADAM & EVE & PINCH ME

ADAM & EVE & PINCH ME. *By A. E. Coppard. 12mo. 140 pages. The Golden Cockerel Press: Birrell and Garnett, Agents. London.*

SOME of the stories are pure fantasy. Coppard begins: "In the great days that are gone I was walking the Journey upon its easy smiling roads and came one morning of windy spring to the side of a wood." He goes on to tell how he met Monk, "the fat fellow as big as two men but with the clothes of a small one squeezing the joints of him together," and how Monk walked with him on the Journey. How they met a man committing a grave crime, and a man committing a mean crime, and a man torturing a beast, and how Monk slew them all three. How they met with Mary and walked with her till they came to a great mountain in a plain and near the top of it a lake of sweet water; there Mary told them her dream and left them very lonely in the world, and Zion still far away.

Elsewhere Coppard becomes an out-and-out realist, deriving obviously—but not entirely—from Maupassant and Chekhov. He tells the story of a little boy, the son of the village atheist, who wandered into church one Saturday after evensong because the place was cozy and beautiful. He fell asleep for an hour and when he woke the doors were locked. He put on the robe of a chorister; he ate the communion bread because he was hungry and drank great draughts of the communion wine. He uttered a rigmarole of prayer (Thirty days hath September; April, June, and November) and fell asleep on the soft carpet within the altar rail.

Evidently he is not, even here, utterly two-by-four; there is always a fourth dimension of poetry. That is the charm of his method. He is at his best when his stories, instead of marching off to an immediate blare of ghostly trumpets, begin with a matter-of-fact narration and slip quite insensibly over the borders of ex-

perience. The title story is like that; its hero comes back from a brilliant afternoon among the trees and dykes of his own fields to find that he has stepped unwittingly out of his body. Dusky Ruth, another tale, begins with a bald and exact description of an inn parlour in the Cotswolds; one reads on listlessly to find that the whole atmosphere has become suddenly charged with violent emotion. Coppard writes well enough to carry off these *tours de force*; his technique consorts well with his chosen subjects.

He uses both landscapes and people in obtaining his effects, and he uses them both in the same way. They are the materials with which he builds; he shapes them skilfully and dispassionately. Dusky Ruth, he says, "wore a light blouse of silk, a short skirt of black velvet, and a pair of very thin silk stockings that showed the flesh of instep and shin so plainly that he could see they were reddened by the warmth of the fire. She had on a pair of dainty cloth shoes with high heels, but what was wonderful about her was the heap of rich black hair piled at the back of her head and shadowing the dusky neck." This description is handled carefully, but with no more humanity than his description of the landscape of the Cotswolds, where "An odd lark or black bird, the ruckle of partridges, or the nifty gallop of a hare had been almost the only mitigation of the living loneliness that was almost as profound by day as by night." The prose here is closely related to that of the early Restoration, when the rolling grandeur of seventeenth century English was tempered with the sharpness and lucidity of the eighteenth. Again he has chosen a medium which falls in happily with the effects for which he is seeking.

The unity of his stories is emotional; it does not depend on time or space. The first few pages are spent in creating an emotion; the last in maintaining it; when the emotion dies, the story comes to an end, without much reference to plot or character. The result is sometimes an air of perverse incompleteness, and the psychoanalysts, to explain it, will refer hastily to their texts. To no avail, for Coppard's workmanship is not subconscious. The apparent difficulty is explained by the fact that his handling of a plot depends on aesthetic judgements and not on journalism or its recent ally, psychology.

The beauty which he attains (I use the word in its technical sense) is satisfyingly restrained; unlike his romantic forebears he

has made the necessary compromise with the imperfections of the actual. In one story he tells how two gipsies found the body of a dead naked woman in the wood, "gone a bit dull like pearls look, but the fine build of that lady was the world's wonder." There was not a scratch or the sign of death on her anywhere, except for a little bird's dropping on her stomach. It is a weird and successful tale, and very modern in its treatment. If Madame Bovary had found that body sixty years ago, she would either have disregarded the one unpleasant detail, or else she would have allowed it to poison the experience. Coppard, on the other hand, makes a whole story turn on it. Madame Bovary, if she became an authoress, would never have staged a love scene, as that of Dusky Ruth was staged, in front of the four black handles of the beer engine. The only point of this discussion is the fact that two romantic generations resembled Emma Bovary much more than they resembled her creator; evidently Coppard has avoided their chiefest weakness.

In the same way he has avoided the *Bovarisme* of the present generation, which depends on neurosis rather than on a false romance. If Emma were a contemporary of ours, she would dissolve her vapours by attending fashionable psychiatrists, and would return home to write poems in free verse beginning "I am tired of . . ." or "I hate people who. . ." It is to her modern prototypes that we are indebted for the novel of nerves and for the development of the cult of the disagreeable. Coppard is not healthier, perhaps, but he is saner; he has nerves, but he does not allow them to be rasped continually.

In fact, he makes a habit out of not falling into pitfalls. He works in dangerous mediums; at any moment he might stumble into the bog of the Freudian novel or, on the other side, into the quicksands of Maeterlinck, but he keeps his feet on the firm way. To attain this surety he must either struggle a long time with his stories or else he tears up most of them. He is a careful workman and a sure workman, and a pleasant reminder that the short story, unlike the autobiographic novel, is not yet a dead form.

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