

After the Altar, the Alternations

"The Sensualists," by Ben Hecht (Messner, 256 pp. \$3.95), explores the various facets of modern love and lust. It is reviewed by the novelist Stanley Kauffmann, who is a critic of both contemporary fiction and films.

By Stanley Kauffmann

THIS is Ben Hecht's first novel in more than twenty-five years, and the gentlest thing to say of it is that he is somewhat out of practice. Mr. Hecht has won a large reputation as a writer of short stories and screenplays, as a newspaperman, biographer, and autobiographer. He is the co-author of three fine theatre pieces, "The Front Page," "Twentieth Century," and "The Great Magoo." (Jean-Louis Barrault thinks the first is one of the best American plays; this reviewer thinks the last an unappreciated vulgar delight.) He comes to his latest work full of years and experience, but, alas, they are not evident in this book, which would be callow and clumsy from any hand and is staggeringly so from his.

It would be incongruous to call his characters by name since they are virtually devoid of reality. The story deals with a Handsome Worldly Husband and a Beautiful Innocent Wife. He gets involved with a Night-Club Singer, who is desired by a Sadistic Detective. Husband is implicated in murder of Singer's estranged husband. Wife, shocked at revelation of his in-

fidelity, nevertheless believes him guiltless of the crime and tries to help him. She meets Singer, who seduces her into a Lesbian experience. This completely deranges the Detective, who is also an impotent drug addict. More violence follows. Wife, sadder and wiser, eventually rejoins Husband.

The point of the story, presumably, is that because of the Husband's misdeeds the sheltered Wife is led to a broader and more tolerant humanity. It is a quite serviceable irony; but here, besides the incredibility of the characters, there is an ineptitude in construction and execution that would be discouraging in a beginner. Mr. Hecht's novel may be based on a true story, as he tells us, but it has not been transcribed into a truthful fiction.

Worst of all—worse even than the facile Freud with which the book is laced—are the epigrams scattered like aphoristic tinsel. "Marriage is depravity with a license." "A woman's lower lip is for kissing. The upper one for crying." "A wife who doesn't betray a husband at least once makes a happy marriage impossible." "News is always bad, that's why it's news." If these few samples strike you as penetrating or witty, you may like the book.

Mr. Hecht says on the jacket that he wrote "The Sensualists" as a "sort of seminar on modern eroticism," which is curious because, despite its subject matter, it has basically a rather old-fashioned, almost prudish air. In understanding of sexual emotions the book is juvenile compared with numerous modern novels, and on physical detail it shyly turns its back. In odd contrast two brutal murders are vividly detailed.

To write thus disparagingly of an author of Mr. Hecht's achievements can only be an occasion of regret. In the period between wars he and Charles MacArthur and Gene Fowler were chief members of a school of journalistic *littérateurs* noted for warm-hearted cynicism, amusing if self-conscious verbal pyrotechnics, and a respectable competence in storytelling. It was the chat of the newspaperman's saloon glorified on paper, and it had a certain beery eloquence. This novel, however, is the thin rinsings of a barrel that is—at the moment, anyway—empty.



—Lotte Meitner-Graf.

Elizabeth Taylor—"cool . . . prose."

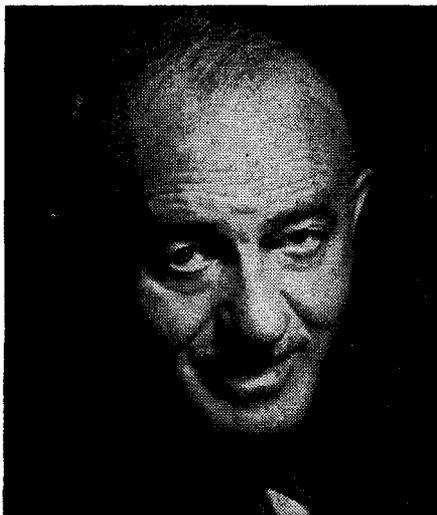
Basics by the Thames

"The Blush and Other Stories," by Elizabeth Taylor (Viking, 217 pp. \$3.50), reveals the subtleties and the solitude that lie beneath common experiences. William Peden, who discusses the collection, is a professor of English at the University of Missouri.

By William Peden

THE short stories and novels of Elizabeth Taylor have always depicted the complexity and confusion which underlie the most apparently orderly human relationships. With admirable understanding Mrs. Taylor reveals the hearts and minds of her characters in a cool, disciplined prose, which is as good as any being written today on either side the Atlantic. "The Blush and Other Stories," her eighth or ninth book, is certainly one of her best.

Except for an unusual turn-of-the-century story about a tormented governess and her bizarre pupil—Mrs. Taylor's version, perhaps, of James's "The Turn of the Screw"—these stories of today's England are set in or near the Thames Valley. The setting, be it a noisy pub or a quiet private home on the river with dew-drenched gardens and flower-scented rooms, is an important element in all her work. Mrs. Taylor is at her best when she explores the drama inherent in such "undramatic" situations as that of a group of girls preparing for a dance, the summer adventures of two spinster sisters, a young woman's tongue-tied embarrassment at a very stuffy dinner. Even when she writes a story around so hackneyed a situation as that of the bride-



—Philippe Halsman.

Ben Hecht—" . . . lower lip for kissing."

groom who is lured to the bar rather than to the bed, Mrs. Taylor's artistry and understanding are combined to produce a thoroughly effective piece of fiction.

Basic man-woman relationships are the essence of most of these stories: the buried life of a middle-aged wife, the gnawing frustration of a young girl married to an older man, the final separation of two lovers. If such stories of aloneness and withdrawal are permeated with the crab-apple tang of desperate melancholy, Mrs. Taylor can also depict scenes of robust humor, as she does in "The True Primitive," in which a self-educated lock-keeper proves to be an immovable obstacle in the path of his son's courting. As robust as a Daumier drawing, the story explodes into rollicking laughter.

Quiet and unsensational, "The Blush" is an impressive and moving collection.

Year of Infamy

"St. Petersburg," by **Andrey Biely;** translated by John Cournos (*Grove*, 310 pp. \$4.75), is a comic novel about the world of high conspiracy and intrigue in Russia of 1905. Robert Payne, who has translated the poetry of Boris Pasternak, is the author of "The Terrorists," among many other books.

By Robert Payne

IN HIS long poem "The Year 1905" Boris Pasternak contemplated with a kind of sad bitterness the desolation of Russia in a year of defeat, famine, and revolution. Over the czar hung the shadow of the terrorist Nechayev; over the workmen and the peasants hung the knout and the death warrant. But as he spoke of the hanging of students, the mutiny in the Black Sea, and the coming storm, Pasternak, while deeply moved by the plight of his country, was able to see that year very much as Yeats saw 1916. A terrible beauty was born, and it was the task of the poet to celebrate the beauty of those terrible days.

Andrey Biely saw it otherwise. He was a distinguished poet whose poems are filled with flashes of forked lightning; he had no patience with cultivated humanism. For him 1905 was a year of stark horror. His famous novel, "St. Petersburg," now at last translated into English, describes the events of that year with savagery and wild laughter directed as much against the incompetent ministers as against the bungling terrorists. Im-

agine a mixture of Rabelais and Dostoevski and you have something of the flavor of this wonderful, grotesque, sad, wicked, and fabulous book.

It is a poet's novel, and therefore there is no story, no plot, and very little characterization. It hardly matters, for the principal character in the book is a sardine tin. This most charming and unforgettable sardine tin is introduced into the house of Apollon Apollonovich Ableukov, the minister of state: a pudgy, pompous man who smells of eau de cologne, is terribly afraid of being assassinated as he goes through the streets in his carriage, and always upholds the virtues of thrift, benevolence, and authoritarian government. Ableukov is something of a caricature, but he is so superbly vigorous a caricature that he rings true. His son, Nikolai, is a halfhearted revolutionary wearing pince-nez, and it is through Nikolai that the sardine tin, which contains a time bomb, is introduced into the house. Nikolai does not know he has the bomb; he thinks it is a sardine tin.

Nothing at all happens in the novel except the wildest improvisation. The conspirators around Nikolai conspire. The minister administers. A revolutionary attempts to hang himself, but only succeeds in dislodging the hook

from the ceiling and bruising the two fingers he had carefully inserted between his neck and the rope. The minister goes on odd little errands of mercy, protecting the virtue of the young women of the capital. Meanwhile, the sardine tin is ticking away, and in the end of course it does explode, doing very little harm: for the harm has already been done in the savage caricature of the minister, his effete sons, and the ludicrous conspirators. Biely keeps the ball in the air by swiping at it savagely and at the same time good-humoredly. It is the oddest of combinations, but in his hands it is a singularly successful one.

Here, then, at long last is one of the great comic novels of our time, inhabiting that strange and rarely explored area where farce and tragedy meet. Why it should have to wait for so many years to be translated (Biely wrote it in 1912) is something of a puzzle, but we should be grateful to John Cournos for making it available now. Biely is insanely difficult to translate, and Cournos has done his job well.

QUEEN'S MAN: "Consort for Victoria" (Doubleday, \$3.95) is the third volume of a Vaughan Wilkins trilogy about the early years of Queen Vic-



An Income Tax Man.



A Rocking Boy.



Incumbent sans Piano.



A Lady of the Streets.



An Aging Actress.



A Literary Man.

"**TIMES HAVE CHANGED**, but hardship and dark corners still remain," writes Alex Atkinson in "The Big City" (Braziller, \$3.95). Ronald Searle is the deft illustrator of this series from the pages of *Punch*, parodying Henry Mayhew's Victorian manual, "London's Labour and the London Poor." Among the witty words and adroit pictures is a serious glimpse into the heart of a rising class in metropolitan society, London's New Poor.