

MOTHER'S BOY

PRATER VIOLET, by Christopher Isherwood. Methuen, London.

"YOU are a typical mother's son," says Bergmann, the only living character in this book, to the author of it (who is perhaps half alive, until smothered by his own creation). "It is the English tragedy."

"Quite a lot of Englishmen do get married, you know," Isherwood parries.

"They marry their mothers. It is a disaster. It will lead to the destruction of Europe."

BERGMANN, the film director brought from Vienna by Imperial Bulldog to make "Prater Violet" into an English box-office hit, is a not unworthy successor to Mr. Norris, who changed trains so impulsively in the most finished sentimental comedy published in England since *Zuleika Dobson*. But if this 100-page novel about the gestation and birth-pangs of a second-rate "screen entertainment" in a London studio in 1934 had been by anybody else, no reviewer would be likely to linger over it. It

could be briefly recommended as pleasant, sensitive writing about a surface theme that is always dramatic (How a Film is Made—the Great Director at Work)—a little better than Vicki Baum, not half as workmanlike as C. S. Forester. And that would be that.

Since *Prater Violet* is the first post-war novel by one who 10 years ago was regarded as the white hope of English fiction in our time, it cannot be dismissed quite so lightly. Christopher Isherwood, let us admit from the start, has all the writer's gifts. "Encased in talent like a uniform," he plunges without delay or false modesty into the heart of his subject.

"Mr. Isherwood?"

"Speaking."

"Mr. Christopher Isherwood?"

"That's me." So *Prater Violet* opens; everybody knows the author; he is doing an act, and watching himself doing it. Lightly the background is sketched, a few subsidiary characters are indicated with deft, economical strokes. Then the spotlight swings firmly on to Bergmann, and stays there. Everyone else is in the flat; no one else comes alive—



CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

except perhaps Chatsworth, the Mogul of this Fulham studio, for a few brief moments. But Bergmann is drawn in the round, with loving care. He is immense and vital and full of symbolic, nostalgic, even political significance.

"Of course we knew each other. The name, the voice, the features were inessential; I knew that face. It was the face of a political situation, an epoch.

The face of Central Europe."

Between Bergmann and the young Englishman engaged by Imperial Bulldog Studio to write his script (this is Isherwood, *in propria persona*) an immediate sympathy is born. Isherwood is a European; he can talk German, his uneasy loyalty to his director is almost embarrassing until at last the horrid truth is revealed—he is Stephen Daedalus, the Son in search of a Father. So the story runs its light and never very animated course, to a lame and mildly ironical conclusion.

"Prater Violet" is *kitsch*; Bergmann and Isherwood are alone in a desert of philistines and soulless technicians. But they make some progress until the crisis (there is no catastrophe) arrives with the events of February, 1934, in Austria. Bergmann torn as a man by anxiety for wife and child left in Vienna, as the conscience of Europe is by deep premonition of impending disaster, is thrown off his stroke as a director, and box-office is threatened. But Chatsworth, or Colonel Blimp, rallies the ranks; Bergmann the maestro takes charge again, and box-office triumphs. On the success of "Prater Violet" Bergmann gets a contract in Hollywood. Isherwood, left to weep alone the wrongs of wounded Europe, will follow soon after.

If it seems unfair to discuss what is supposed to be fiction in such personal terms, one must retort that the author invites it. *Prater Violet* is in

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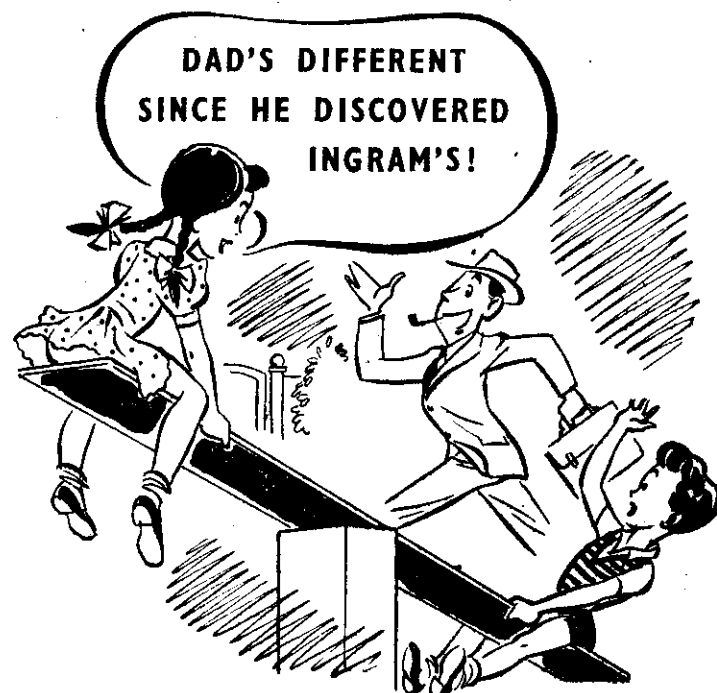
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