

## BOOKS

# The Newest Old Master

MEN AND WIVES and MORE WOMEN THAN MEN. by I. Compton-Burnett; Eyre and Spottiswoode, 7.6 each.

(Reviewed by David Hall)

IT is good news that a uniform edition of the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett is being published. Her earlier books have been unobtainable for some years, and even the later, thanks to the deserved growth of her reputation coinciding with the paper shortage, have often been hard to come by.

So intensely individual a talent would inevitably have to wait for full recognition. Miss Compton-Burnett has gone her own way uncompromisingly, unless it be compromise to intrude into her domestic courts of summary jurisdiction events which in other writers' hands would be melodramatic, a murder or a suicide. Her plots alone seem to me out of character, out of line with her general approach to human beings and the business of putting them into novels. This seems to be borne out by the novels themselves, where a sensational

happening quickly becomes a sort of accepted act of God (or, more accurately here, act of Compton-Burnett), and is assimilated with surprisingly little emphasis into the general pattern of exchanges of volleys of neatly-pointed epigrams between characters whose love and hate are inextricably entangled.

No writer has ever painted so shrewdly or so passionately the intimate ferocity of family life. Nearly every one of her books introduces us to a large family living in the country in England, apparently a few years before 1914, where a host of young people is dominated by some domestic tyrant, draining the life out of them—grandmother, mother, father—and supported in their joys and sorrows by a gloating chorus of friends and neighbours who, like everybody else in her books, talk in admirably turned epigrams.

IN *Men and Wives* (1931) the plot has altogether too many twists. The flirtation of Harriet with death, finally consummated in an enduring embrace, is as hard upon the nerves of the reader as it was upon those of her family. Then



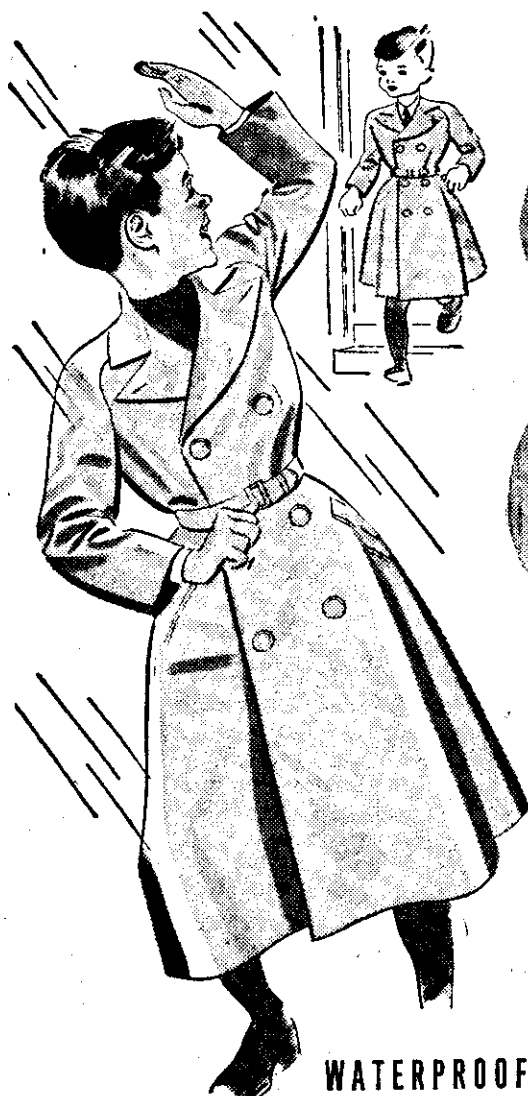
IVY COMPTON-BURNETT  
*The dominance of the many by the one*

people wriggle in and out of betrothal with a cheerful lightness of heart hardly consonant with the general spirit of the book. The puritanism of Harriet is the millstone round everybody's neck. Her death is her triumph: her conscience-stricken children do with their lives what she would have wished. It is a theme of tragic proportions which Miss

Compton-Burnett modifies to her own purposes; for she is as incapable of the highest tragedy as she is of triteness and dullness.

Her method is essentially dramatic. Nearly all the business of her novels is transacted by way of conversation which is apt to be patterned like music with recurring themes. Very little time is wasted describing people or what they do. It all comes out in the conversational wash anyway.

This book does not share fully a defect that creeps into much of her work, that her characters are not sufficiently different in their speech. Spong, the solicitor, is peculiarly fulsome, Camilla flings herself gushingly at every eligible head, and Sir Godfrey's final "sour grapes" speeches are masterly. Also the writer appears to be more aloof from her people than in most of her books and shares the reader's satisfaction in the comedy she is creating. Mrs. Christy, for instance, who "suspected that she had a remarkable brain, and found that her spontaneous conversation proved it beyond her hopes," or again this aside, "Griselda laughed, and Buttermere's face fell at this proof that the trouble bore easy treatment," and Camilla's comment on the fearsome Harriet, "She is a high-minded old tyrant. I adore her. But it is no part of my duty to do her



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