

The Unattainable

THE MERMAIDS (216 pp.)—Eva Boros
—Farrar, Straus & Cudahy (\$3.50).

This first novel is the year's most beautifully written love story. Set in Budapest in the lost era between the two world wars, it begins with a casual pickup on the Danube Corso and ends in heart-break as poignant as the last act of *Camille*. The book, like the play, is about a girl with tuberculosis, but Author Boros' *Dame aux Camélias* is no languishing tragedy-dienne drowning in a sea of self-sacrifice. Instead, young Lalla is self-sufficient, cheeky, preoccupied not with "how to live but how to stay alive."

Aladar, the man in the story, comes as reluctantly to love as the girl. Nearing 40, insulated in the creature comforts of habit, he has reached that safe harbor where the winds of memory can no longer wound. He can think without wincing of his failure as a painter, of his wife's deserting him for another man. Now Aladar is a successful businessman who does not seek adventures. On meeting Lalla, he methodically notes that she is a peroxide blonde, pretty, somewhat common, a compulsive liar, but all the same, rather appealing.

Hothouse Flush. He takes to visiting her at the sanatorium, generously pays for her treatment and embarks on projects to prepare her for the outside world she must face when she is cured. He teaches her French because her only knack seems to be a gift for languages, brings her albums of great paintings, tries to broaden her knowledge of the world. But Aladar is the pupil, not Lalla. He meets two of her fellow patients, strangely charming Franciska, gently maternal Kati. He dotes on the three girls like a fond parent, becomes absorbed in the hothouse flush of the sanatorium, where almost everyone seems young and beautiful because so few live long enough to grow old and ugly. He loves the rhythms of their life, the fevered excitements followed by exhausted pauses; he loves their talk with its curious mixture of simple fun and cruel cynicism.

He is like a civilized man on the brink of going native. Instead of preparing Lalla for the reality of his life, he is becoming enamored of the unreality of hers. He can congratulate himself that "she had picked him blindfold, out of a hundred: rejected husband, melancholy salesman of flour and pigmeal, he was changed into a prince every Saturday afternoon."



Peter Anderson

NOVELIST BOROS

A prince every Saturday afternoon.

It cannot last. Kati dies; Franciska goes away. Aladar throws the whole weight of his personality on Lalla, heaps her with presents and promises. In the end she blurts out a tortured "Leave me alone," and escapes to Germany and the real world. Aladar grimly sees that he had "adored her, bossed her and sentimentalized her, until she could bear it no longer."

International Society. Hungarian-born Author Boros, fortyish, who during 20 years of life in Britain has admirably

mastered the English language, herself spent years in TB sanatoriums. Says she: "Those sanatoriums just don't exist any longer. With all the antibiotics, the illness has lost its peculiar quality. TBs used to be a kind of international society. It was that world of their own that I wanted to write about." The result is no *Magic Mountain*, but it is brilliant in its way.

There has seldom been so sensual a novel written with so little eroticism or with so much effect. Lalla emerges as that

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strange girl who lies buried somewhere in most men's lives, the girl who was never attainable although all circumstances seemed just right for attainment. The supple dialogue is loaded with surprise and revelation; everything that is said has shape and texture and reverberates with hidden meaning. There are self-contained moments of extraordinary power: Aladar's Christmas holiday with his family is a devastating snapshot of what life was for him without Lalla. Most memorable of all, perhaps, is the scene when a cured girl leaves the sanatorium while those left behind crowd the windows to cry over and over: "Don't go away, don't go!"

How Can You Cure Fear?

THE MERMAIDS. By Eva Boros. (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy; \$3.50.)

On a "foolish pink evening" on the Danube, a melancholy miller meets a happy-go-lucky peroxide blonde. There is about her, a shimmer, a childlike joy. Aladar, for whom "not to be unhappy was the great thing in life—to be content with the humble pleasures of his quiet monotonous days"—soon feels his heart swelling with fond, foolish hopes.

To see Lalla Perola, he becomes a regular visitor at the tubercular sanitarium where she is a patient. He meets the other pretty girls who live in her strange, timeless world where there is no future. He learns their moods and their intrigues, he tries to partake of their feverish gaiety. But being well, he can never be fully admitted into that strange society where the conversation veers between grisly surgical details and wild nonsense. One of the mermaids about to die says of him at a party. "To me he is the romantic, old-fashioned type. I see him putting flowers on my grave."

Lalla's moods vary with her temperature. But Aladar is constant, and hopeful as the spring. Like a mariner enmeshed in the toils of a mermaid, he tries to bring his love to the dry land of health and normal life. He cannot know that in his way he represents a menace. In that suspended sphere between life and death, where people are taught to "endure but not to fight," he is an alien monster.

Eva Boros is a Hungarian living in London. She writes in English exquisitely. Her book is as delicately colored as a seashell and as perfectly wrought, shot through with humor and insight. Lightly ruefully, she touches on the plight of the patients. An old count, a lifelong denizen of that mysterious half-world, tells Aladar: "People no longer have any respect for our illness. Some 50 years ago we were the tragic heroes of novels and plays. . . . Now we are looked upon as shirkers, parasites. It seems we want to be ill. I daresay the diagnosis was right, but as for the cure? How can you cure fear?" How, indeed, Miss Boros hauntingly asks.

—M. McG.



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