

NEW NOVELS

- Knight with Armour.** ALFRED DUGGAN. *Faber.*
12s. 6d.
- One Omen.** C. M. WOODHOUSE. *Hutchinson.*
9s. 6d.
- Abide With Me.** CEDRIC BELFRAGE. *Secker & Warburg.* 10s. 6d.
- Dear Life.** H. E. BATES. *Michael Joseph.*
7s. 6d.

Being naturally resistant to historical novels, I stared gloomily at a dust-jacket decorated with a mail-clad figure on a prancing steed. The blurb confirmed my fears. *Knight with Armour* by Alfred Duggan was going to be all about the First Crusade. Though assured that "the battles are exciting and authentic" and that "the author is an experienced horseman who has studied the armour of the period" my appetite remained unwhetted. I started to read as a penitential duty. By the second page I was deeply absorbed. By the last, it was such a wrench to leave the eleventh century and the pilgrim knight Roger de Bodeham that only the necessity of having to write something about the book prevented me from reading it all over again.

Knight with Armour is such an astonishing feat of literal imagination that I can compare it to nothing but *Robinson Crusoe*. Mr. Duggan has Defoe's trick of making the reader identify himself so completely with the admirably ordinary Messer Roger that it becomes an urgent personal anxiety to know whether one will be able to manage one's horse properly in the charge or find someone to unarm one so that one can get a wash after four days in heavy mail under the Syrian sun. Even more remarkable is the book's extraordinary air of authenticity; it reads as freshly and vividly as Joinville. No amount of "studying the armour of the period" accounts for the perfect ease and naturalness with which the author inhabits not only the equipment but the

mentality of his honourable but none too efficient knight. Mr. Duggan neither romanticises nor debunks the age of chivalry; he gives the impression of having slipped through a crack in time and to be actually living in it. He conveys not merely every conceivable discomfort as well as advantage of wearing armour—so that one is dazed by the headache caused by one's ill-padded hauberk while being extremely glad of its protection—but he also conveys the mixed blessings of having to order one's daily life by the chivalric code. One shares all the practical worries of the penniless, landless knight; ill-trained for fighting and a duffer at "courteous love"; torn between the fulfilment of his vow and the demands of his ambitious wife to transfer his allegiance to some wealthier lord, procure himself a castle and settle down to respectable plundering instead of proceeding to Jerusalem. Nor is it only his worries one shares but a whole new set of scruples, sensibilities and limitations. One becomes accustomed to knowing the alphabet but being unable to write a letter; to owing allegiance not to a country but to a chosen leader; to losing one's social status with one's horse; to being entirely dependent on plunder for clothes and money.

I passed from Palestine in 1099 to the Greek mountains in 1942 with hardly any shock. C. M. Woodhouse's Greek peasants and shepherds of *One Omen* would have been perfectly at home in the eleventh century. *One Omen* is not strictly a novel but a dozen episodes based on personal experience of working with the Greek Resistance. These neatly worked-up sketches are obviously written by a man with deep affection for Greece. At first bewildered, even exasperated by the Greek mentality to which time and space are the vaguest entities, he comes, after his long enforced isolation among the mountain people, to respect and almost to share it. The book reminded me strongly of *Les Silences du Colonel Bramble*; indeed it might have been called "The Conversations of Barba Stavro." Barba Stavro, the old Greek who works with the two stranded parachutists shows all the signs of a Homeric character; intense local patriotism, hospitality to the stranger, profound mistrust of other Greeks even if they only come from the next village and delight in argument and story-telling. We recognise not only the Odyssean guile but the age-old sense of inevitable fate. Each episode is good of its kind yet no urgency impels the reader from one to the next. Indeed, after the sharpness of *Knight with Armour*, the "eyewitness" book seems oddly muffled. But in one chapter near the end "Also Serving," the author suddenly heightens the tension and produces something really memorable. It is simply the description of three men, American, English and Greek, hidden in a cave, with nothing to do but watch the empty sea all day for a submarine that never comes, and signal all night in turn with a torch—a signal which is never answered. The three, living at intolerably close quarters, with only snails and boiled acorns to eat suddenly emerge as three intensely real, yet symbolic figures. The irritable, controlled Englishman and the homesick, impatient American while away the daylight playing chess with olive stones and sheep droppings. The Greek, "used to waiting with nothing to wait for," is content to run his string of beads through his fingers. The strain, in which a mistimed joke or too long a silence might set the chess players at each other's throats is somehow made tolerable by the mere presence of Barba Stavro to whom the stopping of a watch, a catastrophe to the other two, means nothing at all.

Cedric Belfrage's *Abide with Me* plunges us straight into the crude and costly barbarism of the worst aspect of American "civilisation." No irreverent attitude towards time here, for time is money and the "transition" from time a sure-fire-profit-maker. A real live-wire undertaker—I mean mortician—does not have to wait for a corpse to begin raking in the dollars. You and I, provided we are Americans of a sufficiently high income group, are excellent prospects for an Easy-Payment Pre-Transition Plan. If anyone supposes Evelyn Waugh was exaggerating in *The*

Loved One let him read *Abide with Me* . . . or, for that matter, any number of "Sunnyside" and "The Casket." *Abide with Me* is a queasy book; the author, besides honest indignation, indulges in a good deal of gloating and nudging, but as an exposure of the methods, economics and sales-practice of Big Business in Death, it is extremely interesting. The morticians are not entirely to blame. The immense and complex business, that includes not merely embalming ("every man a king") and elaborate sarcophagi, but clothes, cosmetics and every kind of freak "accessory" and "service" for the corpse, could not have grown up were there not a public willing to have its "sales resistance" broken down and a comforting, if costly barrier erected against its fears. Compared to Waugh's icy satire, *Abide with Me* is crude and coarse. Yet, perhaps for that very reason, it carries a horrid conviction. No one can possibly persuade themselves that this is fantasy.

I am afraid that H. E. Bates's short novel *Dear Life* leaves me completely cold. It is the story of a young girl who drifts into the company of a Canadian deserter and in a few days takes a dazed share in more than one murder and robbery. The physical descriptions are admirable, the various idioms carefully caught and the minor characters neatly sketched. I can suggest only two reasons for my total lack of response. One is that the whole thing seemed to me artificial and *voulu*; an exercise in "imaginative writing" rather than the product of a genuinely fired imagination. The other is that he endows the girl with an exquisite, strained sensibility that registers every nuance of sound and colour and obviously belongs to the author rather than to the character. The result is that Laura, the central figure, was for me the one completely unconvincing person in the book.

ANTONIA WHITE

PANIC REFURBISHED

Conservatism Revisited. The Revolt Against Revolt. By PETER VIERECK. *Lehmann, 7s. 6d.*

To judge by all accounts, panic has become the principal motive in American politics—panic at the hydrogen-bomb, panic at the advance of Communism, panic at the intolerable prospect of having to devise a policy. There could be no more curious evidence of this panic than Peter Viereck's little tract. Mr. Viereck is a young American historian of liberal background—author some years ago of an admirable book about the Romantic contribution to National Socialism, a much better book than the similar one by an English author. He was pro-British during the war, an outspoken enemy of the Nazis and of German imperialism; and his book is dedicated to the memory of his brother "killed by Nazis as an American volunteer in the never ending war for freedom." Mr. Viereck claims that he is still engaged in this fight. And where does he propose that we should find allies? In Metternich and Burke and all the advocates of conservatism and privilege. It is not surprising that his book should have won praise from the aristocratic amateurs who write history in England and who now discover that in defending Metternich and Talleyrand they were really on the side of freedom after all.

Of course there is something in the thesis. Conservatism is more stable than radicalism; and we should have a quieter life if people were content with things as they are. Metternich's enemies were violent and disruptive; and their triumph, as with German nationalism; was often the triumph of evil forces. A civilised man might justly prefer the company of Metternich to that of "gymnastic-father" Jahn, prototype of German national heroes. Any competent historian could turn out a defence of Metternich on these lines. Metternich prepared a further line of defence, which Mr. Viereck develops for him. Not content with preaching the virtues of stability, he posed as a reformer, though an ineffectual one. The defects of the Austrian Empire were the fault of the Emperor Francis, not of Metternich; and if the radicals had been less insistent and subversive, Metternich would