NEW NOVELS

The Peacemakers. By ALICE RITCHIE. Hogarth Press. 7s. 6d.

The Road to Heaven. By THOMAS BEER. Knopf. 7s. 6d.

Lothian Cameron. By JOHN CARRUTHERS. Cape. 7s. 6d.

Day's End. By H. E. BATES. Cape. 7s. 6d.

Mandrake Over the Water-Carrier. By E. SACKVILLE-WEST. Heinemann. 7s. 6d.

These novels are all above the average, though to anyone who realises what the average novel is, this will seem but faint praise. Twice a year, in the spring and in the autumn, the harsh lonely croaking of the novel reviewer becomes unnaturally loud. There may have been a time when writers were intimidated by this, but now they know better, and continue unperturbed to turn out what is expected of them, sustained by two fallacies: that every human being is capable of writing one good novel out of his own experience, and that everyone who has written one good novel can go on effortlessly producing others. The first object of a reviewer is to get people to write better books, and in the present state of the novel, to prevent a great many people from writing them at all. Let him now pass on to his other function, that of advising the public what to read.

The Peacemakers is a story about the League of Nations which will appeal to all who do not like Geneva. There is no political element; it is the description of a girl clerk's effort to forget her lover, "the long struggle to accommodate life to the loss of love, that unparalleled campaign." The heroine passes from despair to numbness, numbness to artificial interest in the lives of others, artificial interest to genuine sympathy; then, when she has reached the final stage of self-reliance, the maturity of disillusion, "dearly bought and more precious than innocence," her lover comes back again. The author assures us that he is in time, but to those who follow the heroine's sequence of emotions in the long run he will turn out to be late. Thus the book has a happy ending or an ending ironic and lifelike, according to your view of psychology. The rest of it is a picture of life in the League office and of the troubles of a few of the members, troubles which advance and recede in importance according to the heroine's capacity to be interested in the life outside her. The mood of such a book must necessarily be one of undertones. We are in the backwash of tragedy, and Miss Ritchie has succeeded admirably in suggesting it. The description of life in a Geneva pension, of the jealousies of the office and the peculiarities of the clerks are genuine and witty, while the emotions of the heroine and her rare daydreams are beautifully described. The subject is tricky but no trace of self-pity or rhetoric spoils the treatment. The prose is sometimes rather wan, but full of passages of restrained emotional beauty. This is a very promising novel.

The Road to Heaven is one of those novels that Americans seem to turn out by recipe, like their crook plays. Take a young farmer, a young boxer, a Red Indian or any attractive son of the soil. Put him in New York among all the literary people. Now listen to his fresh but vindictive summary of those clever, decadent, cultivated creatures who rashly ask him to their parties. He drinks their champagne. He tells them what he thinks of them. Sometimes he knocks them down. They have to tolerate him because the New York intelligentsia are always, in these books, hopelessly centred round a rich, bored, cruel, beautiful, witty disillusioned woman. The Myra of Mr. Aldous Huxley, the Campaspe of Mr. Carl van Vechten have established her type. She must have plenty of leopard skins and bath salts; she must go fundamentally straight, however obliquely she behaves. She must have a Jacobean name. It is she who protects and usually finances the young hero until it is time for him to leave her and marry the only girl, the only rich girl, who comes from his home town.

The Road to Heaven, as the title indicates, is an admirable exercise in the convention. This does not prevent it from being a capable and amusing book. The author has been unusually fair to the misguided intellectuals who take, not a serpent, but a young bull, into their bosom. Most of the dialogue reads like highly efficient reporting of real types; the hero is very much less of a prig than one might expect, and nearly all the clever people are likeable as well. Frankie (a sad falling off in names) is a convincing vamp, and there is quite a lot of plot for this kind of story. It will appeal to those who like reading about New York, and know only the New York which they like reading about. These crude, effective, ironical American novels are very much better done than our own accounts of Bohemia.

Lothian Cameron describes the struggle of a real lover of education to get his way at a provincial university. The atmosphere is that of the work of Mr. C. E. Montague, the technique is the stream-of-consciousness type of *Mrs. Dalloway*. This makes rather an uneasy blend of thought and action, especially as all the characters, however different their thoughts may be, think always in the same tempo and in the clipped grammar in which it has been decreed that men's thinking shall be done in novels. Cameron is a fierce middle-aged Scotch Socialist who wages a vain war on the sleek controllers of the university. It is a spirited book; all the characters, especially the two women, one of whom marries Cameron, while both love him, are well drawn, but Cameron and his son are rather sentimentalised. The best thing in the book is the account of the intrigue over the vice-chancellorship. There is a pungent quality about academic disputes that makes all novels about schoolmasters, schoolmistresses, and wrangling university senates strangely exciting reading. Perhaps it is only in a tea cup that one really can observe a storm; perhaps the sharp scholarly tongues only find their medium in expressing bitterness or concealing disappointment. Anyhow, there is plenty of this in *Lothian Cameron*, with some good criticism of education, a love-interest and a madman to carry it all along. It is a readable but imitative novel. and the author ends by killing off his hero in the midst of his difficulties, thus cutting a knot which he ought to have unravelled.

Days' End is a book of short stories. They are very good indeed. All are written in the same vein, which would, in lesser writers, be described as poignant. Actually they are studies in diffidence or tenderness described with great reticence of style and feeling. Most short-story writers tend to fall back for all their stories on an especial emotion. Thus all the stories of Mr. Hemingway turn on hopelessness, on the fight of the boxer who knows he will be beaten, the escape of the criminal who knows he will be caught. The inevitable plays in his work the part which suspense, its opposite, plays in detective stories. Similarly Mr. Bates is interested in the obscurer forms of emotional breakdown—sudden panics, hastily checked; silent, unnoticed crises of fear, despair misinterpreted, or the eternal contrast of our daydreams and our limitations. These he describes by delicate understatement. All his stories have just enough point to make a story, and soon he will be able to make one out of nothing at all. They mostly leave an after-taste of regret. It is characteristic that when there is a story of a channel crossing, it should be of the Styxlike transit from Gravesend to Rotterdam; when a river is described, it is as it appears to a homesick boy spending his first night on a barge. The mother is shown adoring the child of whose vulgarity so far only the reader is aware, and the father is seen weeping in public houses for the death of a daughter he beat till she ran away. The most beautiful effects are the quiet descriptions of English scenery or the half-tones which reveal the distress and *malaise* of avenging youth. The author sometimes trembles on the verge of sentimentality, but usually his delicacy avoids it. Two old men have been remembering the joys of eel fishing when they were boys, and have decided to try it once again. They put the lines out in the twilight and agree to come back in the early morning at four. They go to bed in wild excitement:

> In the morning, at dawn, a chill hangs over the river, the water looks cold and like steel, and the grass, the dog-roses, and the honey suckle are drenched in dew. From the east to the zenith a cold pink light spreads reluctantly, but there is no warmth and the leaves shiver. Now the reeds droop, looking a dirty, dishevelled green and with a rustling sound shudder and sway.
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> Among them, in the deep water under the willow-tree, five or six empty eel-lines sway backwards and forwards, first in the grey light, then in the rose, then in the soft early sunshine pouring from the blue sky.
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> Birds wake, cattle pass across the meadows, in the village a bell rings for an early service. But along the river path nobody comes.

Mandrake Over the Water-Carrier is more audacious in technique. The first impression one gets is that the author is out to bounce the reader. The title seems fashionably obscure, the wrapper depicts a Russian-ballet-looking young man, the front page has a passage of music, most irritating of epigraphs, and some metaphysical quotations. In a short foreword, Doctor Theophrastus warns, greets, exasperates the reader. All this seems to have happened to us before, and we suddenly realise that we have seen it in a German film. One should not compare this with other novels, but see instead how it improves on *Dr. Caligari*, if the impressionist day dreams of Thea are an advancement on the cubist nightmares of the queen in *The Nibelungs*. We might wonder if the captions, as represented by the jaw-breaking periphrases of Dr. Theophrastus, could not altogether be omitted. For the story tells itself, and as we

read on, becomes unexpectedly interesting. It is full of the supernatural, which however is flung out so violently that one accepts it without surprise, as one is meant to. Godfrey Leboucher lives on a Channel island with his mother (who isn't his mother), a crank father, and a dumb sister. They keep a mandrake. Ferris Thune arrives, another crank, with a wife who falls in love with Godfrey, and a half-witted daughter. Other islanders are Fulk Thrutcher and Bertram Glove. They are cranks too. All these four elderly men are far too alike, owing to imperfect parturition from the brain of the author. Ferris and Fulk indeed are almost indistinguishable. The mandrake, so Mrs. Leboucher and the witch (there is, of course, a witch) think, symbolises the love that flowers between Godfrey and his father. To help this on Mrs. Leboucher kills herself, and the witch is blamed by Godfrey. Thea, the dumb sister, falls in love with Tamerlane, a wandering boxer. He deserts her. She goes to London and brings him back. She deserts him. Godfrey finds his reproach of the witch has turned into an image of himself which tries to drown him. He gives in unwillingly to Mrs. Thune. His father burns her house down with her and Tamerlane inside it. Brother and sister are free again. The mandrake is a sham, the homicidal image had disappeared. The witch is fallible. Perhaps she is Godfrey's real mother. The moral of this book seems the desperate importance of personal relations, for which all the powers of heaven are prepared to fight, and through which the soul of the individual can be lost for ever. Fulk Thrutcher has a theory that human life is so in harmony with all that symbolises it in nature, that the truth lies only in finding what these symbols are. Godfrey, who has hitched his wagon to a mandrake, discovers this to his cost. Ferris Thune insists that the soul is the only true myth, because it implies that everybody has an essence which makes them different from others. Mr. Leboucher juggles with the signs of the zodiac (the significance of which the reader uneasily feels he is expected to have known from childhood). Godfrey is Aquarius, the water-carrier. Thea proves that it is a mistake for the intelligent to fall in love with bruisers. "That Rousseau-like hatred of the intellect is false all through."

The whole book is a mass of internal symbolism but it is impossible to see what is the symbolical truth of the whole story. This astrology, these symbols within symbols, make the characters of such universal importance that their drama ought in turn to symbolise some universal conclusion. Either it doesn't, and is only "a slice of life," or I have been unable to grasp the real significance and meaning. The book is very carefully written and one can assume that everything in it is meant to be there. The wit is good and the prose excellent. But Mr. Sackville-West is one of those modern writers who seek to create a universe of their own from their own sensibility; and he is likely to have to wait a bit before his readers are at home in it.

CYRIL CONNOLLY.

lonely child. The little chap who fought his way up Christ's Hospital with no homegoing for year after year, stiffened by the dream of being some day able to help his mother and his stepsisters away in America, kept all his life the kind of shyness which dreads to be left alone, works with the door ajar and one ear cocked for the children's voices, writhes at the bare thought of hurting other people's feelings, and yet grows in self-defence a skin of irritability and contradictiveness, thirsts like a traveller in the desert for a chance of doing other people a kindness and never loses the craving for that delicious half-guilty thrill which comes from other people's gratitude to those who know they ought not to afford to be generous. The American millionaire who wanted to be pitied because it was so hard for him to give, had his counterpart in A.L., who found it impossible to refuse, who could not help helping people. There is a true simplicity of soul and a fundamental humility about a man whose favourite form of self-indulgence is to do a kindness. But A.L.'s responsiveness was itself a kind of fence for his reserve: it was not his heart that he carried on his sleeve. The friendliest of men to meet, the most genially aggressive of talkers, the most inspiriting of listeners, he was not an easy man to get to know. He often put you on your mettle rather than at your ease; he could give you a queer feeling of being politely but ruthlessly taken to pieces, oiled and braced, and put together again; he was the kind of man who might have been positively offensive to you, if you tried to thank him for saving your life, as if he were afraid to admit to you and to himself how terribly pleased he was to have done it.

The other kind of shyness has helped in the writing of this as of so many other books. People whose reserve is all on the surface (so that instead of stimulating it represses) often find it easier to write than to talk. One need not be afraid of boring a reader who can put down a book whenever he chooses, and it is a comfort, when one remembers so much so vividly, to take the public into one's confidence. Only the people who will not smile or frown in the wrong place will take the trouble to read on. So the Master's wife has been able to write about him and about herself just as she would talk to the kind of old friend who is sure to be interested in what interests her. How soon she discovered that she had a "natural knack with babies," how frightened she was of dons when she first came to Oxford, how awkward it was when her father and her husband were both talking hard at opposite ends of the same table, how difficult to make the family budget balance when the spending was done with royal generosity by the family breadwinner, how somebody had to administer reproof to resident pupils who failed to respond, as so few did, to the inspiration of the great encourager, how there had to be somebody somewhere who was sometimes brave enough to be rude; such things may not interest everyone, but they bring back memories so vivid that they write themselves for those who care to have them told. So it is with Bamburgh in 1864: the arrival in the warm dining-room "smelling