

## Fiction

### SEASONAL DISHES

CLANCY CARLILE : *As I Was Young and Easy*. 243pp. Chatto and Windus. 15s.

H. E. BATES : *A Breath of French Air*. 159pp. Michael Joseph. 12s. 6d.

T. DE VERE WHITE : *An Affair with the Moon*. 240pp. Gollancz. 15s.

None too soon, we are to have a chair of American literature in at least one of our universities, and there will doubtless be a great many essays written by undergraduates on the influence of Mark Twain. It is astonishing, when you look round, to see the number of American novels which, even to-day, derive from him not only the "natural" idiom—and American writers seem to have a remarkably sensitive ear for dialect—but also the hobo-adolescent hero, of which *The Catcher in the Rye* is one variation. *As I Was Young and Easy*, a first novel by a young man from Oklahoma, who claims to have read his first book aged twenty-one, is a typical inheritor of this tradition. Told with spontaneous and simple charm, it is the story of a Southern boy's twelfth summer, the summer they had a mountain lion raiding the farms, seen through the eyes of Ray Macky, who is known as "pest" by his mother and "runt" by the other boys, because he isn't as cocky as his twin brother Clay. The jealousies, tears, excitements and disappointments are described with touching vigour; when it is funny, the narrator is made to seem innocently unaware he has made a joke; when it is sentimental, there is no self-consciousness. Even the least "phony" novel of this kind demands, of course, a certain suspension of disbelief, and until you get accustomed to Mr. Carlile's style, his grammar and spelling seem almost exaggeratedly phonetic—"at" instead of "ate," "Ify" instead of "if you, if he, if I." But in his unpretentious way he has produced a delightful and entirely convincing portrait, which could have done without the childish line illustrations. It is not his fault that there have been so many other novels very like it.

We are already, most of us, tired of hearing that this is the Silly Season, but the phrase provides some excuse for Mr. Bates's piece of nonsense entitled *A Breath of French Air*. This is the sequel—and what a mistake so many sequels turn out to be—to his best-selling story about the incorrigible Larkin family, *The Darling Buds of May*. The Larkins, Pop, Ma, and seven bouncing illegitimate children, are Rabelaisians *de nos jours*. Untroubled by tax-inspectors (one of whom has now married into the family), shortages, education or morals, they rollick from feast to feast, bursting at the seams with

uninhibited jollity. Mr. Bates thought it would be amusing to give them a holiday in Brittany—lots of jokes about Parley-voos and frogs' legs jump, correctly, to mind—so the yellow Rolls-Royce descends on the Hôtel Beau Rivage, dusty and fusty and lashed by Atlantic winds. Pop quickly finds that a kiss or two works wonders with Mademoiselle Dupont. Ma sits contentedly giving little Oscar his drop of "her Guinness," and Mariette disports herself in gorgeous bikinis to the delight of handsome French youths. All in all, what the advertisements might rightly describe as ideal holiday reading, particularly for those who are secretly longing to be back with the roast beef and Yorkshire. But Mr. Bates would relieve his old admirers if he adopted the policy of Mr. Graham Greene and called this "an entertainment"; we are looking forward to the next "novel."

Equally suited to the season, for those who prefer their jokes to be not exclusively banana-skin, is *An Affair with the Moon*. Mr. Terence de Vere White has managed to pack a little of almost everything into his first novel, which is about a dull small-town solicitor who finds himself unaccountably the fourth (or so) husband of beautiful, impossible Jane. Jane has, according to her beguilingly vague confessions, always been at the wrong end of the divorce stick, and the world, as a consequence, owes her not only a retinue of lovers but a fortune to make herself attractive to them. Poor Denis watches helplessly while this innocently dishonest bundle of femininity ("Do you think I am very frivolous, darling-heart?") she inquired when they first met) is bored in Venice, amused in Dublin, and absurdly out of place in the decaying Georgian mansion she persuades him to buy in County Wicklow. Alternately scandalizing and seducing their hunting neighbours, Jane drives Denis to act the jealous husband, when he discovers he no longer cares. This is the beginning of what the publishers call "the dying fall" of the comedy. Mr. White succeeds in making Jane just about bearable, in spite of her wide-eyed wickedness, and is at times very funny about the Irish at home; a chance reference to Miss Honor Tracy, however, reminds one that the Irish character has been better guyed, and the indifference with which one accepts a bitterly ironic ending shows how little either Jane or her husband has come to life.