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# NEW NOVELS *By Richard Church*

**ROGER VERCEL** is the equivalent, amongst French novelists, of our Mr. C. S. Forster. **Troubled Waters**, one of the few books published last year in France, is now translated by Warre B. Wells (Hamish Hamilton, 8s.).

It is the tale of a trawler captain and his son, during a six months' voyage in the cod-fishery grounds off Iceland. It is told in a bald, unrhymed way, that gradually works upon the reader with a cumulative effect. At first, all is family happiness. The boat, newly commissioned, is working up the coast of France to Boulogne, and in the captain's cabin a luncheon party of six, a tight squeeze, is making a ceremony of the occasion. For Madame Helene Villemeur, a handsome and vivacious woman in her forties, is exerting her social charm to make the last few hours an occasion for happy memories upon which her dotting, uxorious husband may feed during the grim months of celibate hardship in the winter seas of the north. The skipper, Villemeur, is basking in the last of the sun, as it were. From time to time he takes his wife by her wrist, and careless of the embarrassment of his officers, and the sulking of his son, a youth of eighteen, he gloats over the well-preserved beauty of this woman to whom he has been married for nineteen years, but with whom he has actually spent five years, so many months, and so many days, a statistic which his simple passion has worked out down to the last, precious and distilled minute. He is wax in her hands. The officers look on blankly as she feeds him with winter-grown strawberries, and invites them to share. The son grows even sulkier.

Obviously there is something resentful about the boy. We soon learn what it is, for at last his mother can stand his offhandedness no longer, and she turns on him. It appears that he refuses to return to school at Cherbourg to take his examinations. He insists on accompanying his father. He refuses to say why. He says, and insists again, that there is no reason for his obstinacy. But nothing will shake his resolution, and finally, the mother leaves the ship at Boulogne, and the boy remains.

Once at sea, he finds that he is in another world, one which startles and alarms him. But he has chosen his course, and he determines to stick to it, in spite of the loneliness and the jeers of his father, who is anxious for him to have a taste of the discomfort and then to take a return boat at the first puff of call, so that the poor mother may be reassured and comforted. Jean Villemeur soon discovers that "to those who are imprisoned on board ships, everything is lacking. Many a habit which seems to belong to life on land slips away as the coast recedes: walking, choosing your own path, meeting somebody or something friendly, the street with its life, the road with all its surprises—in short, all the gifts of freedom."

That freedom is now restricted to the dimensions of the trawler, a large boat of its kind, new and comfortable, with central heating and oil-fuelled engines, a powerful creature of fifteen hundred horse-power and a speed of twelve knots. And in command of her stands his father, a seaman famous amongst the French cod-fishing folk, a man who knows every rock, every shoal, around the treacherous shores of Iceland, whence comes the wealth that builds the boats, feeds the crews, and pays the dividends of the directors. Villemeur has had a shoal off Newfoundland named after him, as it was he who discovered and charted it, in his early days as a captain. He is now forty-six, his skill a legend. He is worshipped by his crew. But he is growing weary of it all. He wants to accumulate enough money to retire, and to enjoy at last the full glory of this wonderful wife who has given him the son who has had always to take second place in his affections.

Hitherto, Jean has seen only the domestic side of his father. Now he finds a second person, one who terrifies him. In place of the well-dressed, bland Frenchman, stands a brute of a man, clad in a slimy old beret, an olive green jersey, and clogs: a man who stands on the bridge, his gaze fixed, his face set like a rock; a man who shouts and raves, and is held in great awe by every member of the ship's company, from first mate to galley-boy. Jean is at first desperately sick, and he finds himself treated with a cold respect, as though standing in the shadow of his father's authority. Nobody can understand why he is here, and he is lonely. The psychological situation is not cleared up until two terrible disasters occur at the end of the tale.

But that is not the whole book. Its incidental interest is in the detail of the life on board during the voyage. It is so vividly presented that somehow, as one reads, the motion of the Arctic waters gets into one's stomach, and the stench of gutted cod into one's nose. Nothing is omitted, not even the dimensions of the trawl, with its vast mouth thirty-five yards by twelve deep, and its belly seventy-five yards long, capable of taking twenty-five tons of codfish at one haul. A false turn of the rudder, and the whole of this elaborate apparatus, to the value of two hundred pounds, is lost. All this matter-of-fact material, together with much more



Miss Anne Meredith.



M. Roger Verce.

generalized impression, of water and sky and the superb coast of Iceland, contribute to make a tale that one is not likely to forget.

It is rather abrupt to turn from this to **Anne Meredith's** new novel, **There's Always Tomorrow** (Faber and Faber, 7s. 6d.). This tale also has a certain matter-of-factness, almost a perfunctoriness, in its treatment of human reactions to violent events. Sudden death, suspected murder, public trial, and loss of beloved people in the opening phases of the war, are accepted by the characters in the book with a readiness that I have found shocking. The news comes along, but the meals and the bickerings are hardly interrupted.

Bickerings there are in plenty, for an old landed family is on its last legs, and indeed would have been knocked off then were it not for the marriage of the eldest daughter, Stella, and the financial flair of the eldest son Gordon. This Gordon is a modernist, a City man who began as a boy by selling his father four penny stamps for fivepence when the post office was shut and a letter had to be posted at the last moment. Such tactics are continued from infancy to adult life, with the result that he gets all he wants—for he does not appear to want the respect and affection of his relatives. By a foul trick, he drives away his foster-brother Nigel, in order to marry Nigel's girl, a lovely woman who remains somewhat passive in her beauty. The story opens when the marriage has lasted for six years, without Gordon having succeeded in capturing his wife's affections or alienating them from the exiled Nigel, said to be in Bermuda after some shady work in the City in which the unsuspecting fellow had allowed Gordon to enmesh him.

There is also another unpleasant character, an uncle, who is a broken-down actor reduced to cadging

## To choose from . . .

"Proceed, Sergeant Lamb," by Robert Graves (Methuen, 8s. 6d.).

"Troubled Waters," by Roger Verce (Hamish Hamilton, 8s.).

"England is My Village," by John Llewelyn Rhys (Faber, 6s.).

"What! No Morning Tea?" by Anthony Cotterell (Gollancz, 4s. 6d.).

"H. L. Piozzi (Mrs. Thrale)," by J. L. Clifford (Oxford University Press, 21s.).

"Hell Came to London," by Basil Woon (Peter Davies, 6s.).

drinks and meals. He gets short shrift from the tough-hearted Gordon, but from time to time he appears at the old home to "rest" for a while, one of the large household presided over by the generous Stella and her rich husband. Such an occasion opens the book. But this time, Nigel suddenly reappears after an absence of eight years. He is no longer naive. He is hard, intense, a man quick on the draw. And as soon as he and his old love meet, they are in each other's arms, and have planned to elope that very night. There follows a row with Gordon, who quite naturally and vehemently objects to this interruption of what he has long been hoping will become his domestic bliss. Down in the grounds, a shot is heard, and Nigel returns to the house with blood on his hands.

Of course, he is arrested, and there is a trial. But at the end of the trial, an alibi is brought forward by a man who is wooing Gordon's younger sister, a girl also in love with Nigel. That complicates matters so much that the story has to continue long after the result of the trial, in order to work out the emotional implications which, in spite of their casual and detached relationship to the characters of the book, manage to hold the reader under a spell of excitement to the end.

## SHORT STORIES

Reviewed by H. E. BATES

**ENGLAND IS MY VILLAGE**, by John Llewelyn Rhys (Faber and Faber, 6s.), is the first notable book of stories directly inspired by the war; indeed, I shall be surprised if the war, though it goes on for ten years, produces another volume of its kind. This short book, containing only ten stories, all of them about flying, fliers and war in the air, stands a fraction beyond the range of ordinary criticism. The most satisfactory way of reviewing it would be to quote, preferably in entirety, the preface by the author's wife.

Flight-Lieutenant Rees (for some reason he preferred this slight variation between his flying name and his writing name) was killed in action in August, 1940. To those who never fly perhaps the most astonishing thing about aerial war has been a strange quality of reticence, sometimes dumbness, and of almost inarticulate nonchalance, in the attitude of those who take part in it. Risking and finally losing their lives, fighting almost stratospheric combats, they have little to say about it except in terms of almost schoolboyish under-statement. Yet it must be clear, and Miss Oliver's beautiful and understanding preface to her husband's stories endorses it, that these men are silent or non-committal not because they have nothing to say but because "the effect of flight imposes . . . on a highly-gearred nervous system certain stresses of which we know nothing. Fear, fatigue and exaltation combine, perhaps, to produce a friction sufficient to burn away the clutter of inessential things which cumber most of our lives and strip the main fabric bare."

That is the key-sentence to the rare quality of the stories in this book. Their combination of austerity and mysticism, of taut balance, of spare keen beauty and remoteness, are qualities imposed on their creator by experiences of abnormal reality, of almost ethereal terror. Miss Oliver speaks in one place of her husband's first impression of a parachute drop: "The fear was so awful it amounted to an ecstasy." That same fear and ecstasy, with all the stoicism, the sardonic fatalism, the impatience with the superficialities of existence, the love of natural beauty and life that must lag behind, are inherent in every one of these two hundred pages. To take these stories to pieces, to criticize them in detail, would be something of an impertinence. Technically they are nevertheless admirable; it is the rare emotional force behind them that is beyond computation. They are, and I think will remain, a unique expression of our time.

Prefaces to volumes of stories appear to be becoming increasingly popular—as if authors, perhaps, feel the necessity of jolting the public out of its absurd indifference to their art; but by far the most sensible of these recent prefaces is **Mr. Jerome Weidman's** seven-page summary of his craft in **The Horse That Could Whistle Dixie** (Heinemann, 8s.). A superficial assessment would put Mr. Weidman in the tough school. His work is spare, muscular, utilitarian; but underneath the tough exterior there is a generous, sympathetic, even tender personality that is touched, amused, and sometimes a trifle aghast at the oddity of life in New York's dead-ends, Jewish quarters, shops, hotels and offices.

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### NEW NOVELS—

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The American short story writer (it is estimated there are 200,000 of them) fights hard for recognition, and does not get there with soft hands. Mr. Weidman begins by telling how he first began writing stories and ends by telling how the only stories he never sold were those that editors asked him to write. The moral, expanded by Tchegov forty years ago, is clear: "A man writes as he must and as he will." When Mr. Weidman does that, as in that excellent little sketch, *My Father Sits in the Dark*, he is very good indeed.

Miss Pearl Buck's stories in *To-day and Forever* (Macmillan, 8s. 6d.) are all of China. "The least extraordinary in incident are purely imaginative. . . . The most extraordinary incidents . . . are based on true happenings." Many are of the China War. In the attempt to capture a Chinese atmosphere Miss Buck employs a curiously half-formal style, almost pseudo-Biblical, which continually detracts from reality. Somehow one has the impression of looking on from a distance, listening to a sympathetic and well-meaning commentator.

### LOVE AND THE STAGE

Reviews by LILIAN ARNOLD

**THIS BLIND ROSE**, by Elizabeth Frayne (Hodder and Stoughton, 8s. 3d.), is an unusually sympathetic and convincing novel of the stage. Stella Merrian, acknowledged to be "an authentic star," has four generations of actors behind her. The theatre is in her blood and she takes it for granted that it must equally appeal to her three children. Martin, her son, and Maureen, her elder daughter, reveal, however, a disappointing tendency to look upon themselves as Selbys rather than Merrians, but in Sonia, her younger daughter, she recognizes with satisfaction something of her own temperament and her own fire. When an early love affair threatens to divert the girl's career to domesticity, the mother intervenes. Hoping to supplant the lover by the intoxication of success behind the footlights, she casts Sonia as *ingénue* in a new play which she is about to produce with herself as star. It is the old, cruel story of a jealousy which is partly artistic, with the great Stella Merrian in the undignified rôle of maternal-shrew. Sonia, shocked and wounded in her affections, takes refuge under an assumed name in an obscure touring company. Here she encounters life in the raw and finds the key to its ultimate meaning. A good story in which vital human interest supersedes the professional.

In *Dinah's Husband* (Cassell, 8s.) Ursula Bloom has essayed, with a considerable measure of success, a triangular form of narrative for her story of a human triangle. At nineteen Dinah has married an elderly husband of sixty or thereabouts, Morgan Hale is something of a philosopher. Before marriage he promises that if, in the natural course of events, Dinah should want to leave him, he will make things easy for her. The occasion arises when Lieut. Piers Grant, R.N., comes to their Berkshire village to recuperate after an illness, and youth calls to youth. Personally, I feel that no amount of youth could have made up for Piers's distressingly frequent use of "my pretty" as a form of endearment, but Dinah falls blindly for the young sailor's vigour and vitality. True to his marriage contract, Morgan accepts and discusses the situation frankly, offering to their consideration three possible courses to be followed. Much of the story passes in Malta, with which island Miss Bloom is obviously familiar.

The background of Miss Leonora Starr's freshly written love story, *Gallant Heart* (Herbert Jenkins, 7s. 6d.), is a military station in North-West India. Doramy Curtis goes out with her friend, Felicity Armadale, partly as a friend of the family and partly as nursery governess to the Armadale children. Having spent most of her life as a country mouse in a remote Suffolk vicarage, she emerges as a beauty under the skilful treatment of a sophisticated but genuine friend and, arrived in India, takes most hearts by storm. Her true-love-story is complicated by a more than usually noxious vamp who is happily routed in the end. The sidelights on interior decoration and clothes will intrigue every woman reader.

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### THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE

*Soil and Sense*, by Mr. Michael Graham (Faber, 7s. 6d.), is primarily a book for farmers and landowners, but it is also intensely interesting to any countryman who is concerned for the future. Agriculture has been so badly treated in the past that hope for its future sometimes sinks to zero. If it is true that the only thing to save the world is a new religious sense (as it may be), then there is something to be said for agriculture, which a classical writer placed next to philosophy in importance. Our national interest in it is fitful and not always informed. At the moment war conditions have forced it on the public attention. Mr. Graham shows how the old-time farming scheme was founded on practical experience and the experiments of that great man, Coke of Norfolk, but he admits that modern times have brought problems then undreamt of. For instance, "when motor-cars became general the Home Counties lost their supply of horse dung, which used to leave London every day by wagon, barge and railway truck." And the modern small family means small mutton—and that means shepherds out of work—and the loss of sheep on light lands means that the land which their thousands of footprints made substantial enough to grow wheat is no longer wheat-growing. Even the disappearance, centuries ago, of the wolf who strewed bones about the land was not entirely a benefit! Leaving the wolf out of the argument, Mr. Graham justifies very plausibly the fertility scheme of our forefathers. His book should be read as a thoughtful and provocative contribution to an urgent problem.

### WHAT HAPPENED TO FRANCE

A further valuable contribution to the long story of the French defeat is *Truth on the Tragedy of France*, by M. Elie J. Bois (Hodder and Stoughton, 7s. 6d.). M. Bois, editor of the one paper in Paris completely free from Party interest, has written a highly dramatic report of his observations from "the front row of the stalls." In most particulars he agrees with M. André Maurois's analysis of the downfall, though he has not made long incursions (as the novelist, being in a better position for observation, did) into the military aspect. M. Bois's story is the story of political cut-and-thrust, of personalities in fatal conflict, of rats gnawing away at the roots of a country's strength. It might almost be said that the book has a hero—M. Georges Mandel, now awaiting trial on the grimly farcical charge of "war-guilt"; for him M. Bois has nothing but admiration. "Dear Mandel," he writes, "you had won a victory for which you would be made to pay dearly. Were I writing of anyone else I should have scruples about compromising you by paying you so much homage, but I know you are not one of those who repudiate their actions, their friends, and even their thoughts. There is no breaking the tempered steel of your will." Those who can relish gossip-interest even in a tale of tragedy will be absorbed by sidelights upon M. Reynaud's friend, Hélène de Portes, upon the sinister Laval and upon the aged Marshal who outlived his honour.

### THE ENGLAND OF PRE-HISTORY

The memorials left by England's earliest inhabitants are numerous and varied, ranging from the megaliths of Stonehenge to the ramparts of Maiden Castle, but for most of us the people themselves have no more reality than ghosts. It is one of the merits of Mr. Grahame Clark's *Prehistoric England* (Batsford, 8s. 6d.) that these dim ancestors are made to appear as living men and women. Writing of hill-forts, Mr. Clark draws an illuminating parallel. "In relation to the standard of economic wealth prevailing at the time," he says, "the efforts of the hill-fort builders can only be compared with those of modern taxpayers in face of rearmament programmes."

Modern archaeological research owes much to the aeroplane, which can reveal the sunken skeleton of a landscape in places where nothing is visible to the observer on ground level. Mr. Clark takes note of this and recalls that it was an airman—Wing-Commander Insall—who discovered the sacred sites at Woodhenge (near Stonehenge) and Arminghall (near Norwich).

Mr. Clark's picture of life in prehistoric Britain is built up under eight headings: The Food Quest, Dwellings, Handicrafts, Mining and Trade, Communications, Hill-Forts, Burial, and Sacred Sites. He writes always with the general reader in mind, but his skilled arrangement of little-known and recently discovered facts will be valued by the expert. The book is delightfully illustrated, like all Batsford productions, and special mention must be made of the reproductions from Stukeley's eighteenth-century engravings.