

# CONFLICTS IN SPAIN

**HUMPHREY SLATER: *The Heretics*.** Secker & Warburg. 8s. 6d.

Mr. Humphrey Slater's novel is honest, clever, entertaining, exaggerated, youthful. It has a quality of carelessness, almost an "unwritten" quality, that makes his performance as a whole slightly amateurish, but at the same time it exhibits an astingency of mind and imagination that is very engaging and seems full of promises.

The novel falls into two separate parts, which are held together in the first place by Mr. Slater's idea of what Russian Communism to-day has in common with the Roman Catholic Church in the past. The earlier part describes the adventures of three small children in Avignon during the concluding phase of the extirpation of the Albigensian heretics in Provence. The other, lifted forward into our own time without ceremony of any kind, records the participation of three English persons (who happen to bear the same Christian names as the children in Avignon) in the civil war in Spain. There is no formal attempt to span the centuries which divide the two sets of circumstances; what symbolism may be contained in the use, for instance, of the same Christian names is too naive to serve any unifying purpose. The likeness which Mr. Slater discovers between Pope Innocent III's campaign and the Russian Communist campaign in Spain enfolds both parts of the novel in a common satirical view of the penalties of a dogmatic and anti-nominalist philosophy, but otherwise each part is enclosed within an independent framework of scene and character.

In lively and unsentimental fashion, and with a seemingly flippant and teasing detachment, Mr. Slater pictures the innocence and cruelty of the trio of children in Avignon. Paul and Elizabeth, brother and sister, are the children of the chief clerk of the little Republic, while Simon is the son of an Albigensian father, a nobleman who has fled from Carcassonne. It is Simon who is the chance instrument of disaster; his father, the clerk and his wife, and even the unhappy Father Hennequeville, are all burned at the stake as heretics, while the children themselves lead a criminal gang and are shipped off in the Children's Crusade to Alexandria and slavery. Mr. Slater's contemporary idiom is now and then violently incongruous, and his interpretative arguments are often out of period; but the brutal simplicity and the sardonic humour of the story are undeniably telling.

In the story of the civil war in Spain the comedy is no less jaunty but even more savage. Of the three English tourists, all engaged in anthropological studies of a sort, Elizabeth becomes the mistress of a loyalist staff officer, Paul serves as a volunteer with the anarchists in Aragon, and Simon becomes a member of the Russian secret police. Mr. Slater's is a biting satirical view of Communist orthodoxy. He writes with too casual an air and without any arduous thought for the niceties of the craft of fiction, but he has intelligence, invention and a sincere feeling for moral essentials.

**H. E. BATES: *The Cruise of the Breadwinner*.** Michael Joseph. 5s.

In a short story done with practised or over-practised simplicity Mr. H. E. Bates draws a note of sober pathos from an incident of war at sea. The crew of the *Breadwinner*, a small fishing-boat in the English Channel, consists of the captain, Gregson, fat, fleshy, loud-voiced and kindly; the grumbling Jimmy, the engineer, who is in charge of an ancient machine-gun; and the seventeen-year-old Snowy, the boy in the galley, whose naive heroic sentiment seems to belong to somebody several years younger. Soon after they have sailed they pick up a Typhoon pilot in his rubber dinghy, then the German pilot he has shot down. With both on board the *Breadwinner* is raked by cannon-fire from a low-flying Messerschmitt; the engine is crippled, Jimmy is killed and both pilots are mortally wounded. They die slowly, with Snowy as a witness of their suffering, while Gregson, who has managed to rig a sail, brings the boat back to the shore.

There is not a great deal more in the story than the reiterated sense of the pity of war. Mr. Bates is restrained in manner, although in trying to fill in his sketches, more particularly of the big-bellied captain and the boy Snowy, his touches seem to be

a little arbitrary. Altogether the tale has an effect of truthfulness without stirring emotion in the reader at all deeply.

**NEIL BELL: *Life Comes to Seathorpe*.** Eyre and Spottiswoode. 10s. 6d.

Mr. Neil Bell is so good a storyteller that in "*Life Comes to Seathorpe*" he almost succeeds in passing off two unrelated stories as one novel. He devotes his first eighty pages to establishing Mark Passmore in the reader's sympathy. Passmore is a wealthy young man who chooses Fleet Street instead of Oxford, becomes a successful writer of "features" and then retires to the seaside town of Seathorpe to write books and contemplate matrimony. At this point, as the reader settles to observe the hero's struggles with literature and love, the story ends, a tantalizing fragment, and a new tale begins.

The new plot, No. 6 of "*Potted Plots for Nonplussed Novelists*," shows the mad scientist adapted to play an electric orchestra while creating things that go bump in the night and dissolve into pools in bourgeois bedrooms. In his endeavour to link the two stories Mr. Bell introduces some interesting minor characters, tells some diverting anecdotes and gives Superintendent Ferris's list of "unique" books (which readers will do well to note). But neither the author's usually effective artifices, nor his grip, can close the gap. Unable to "plunge" his hero into the mystery, Mr. Bell artfully manoeuvres him into paddling in its shallows. In this new setting Passmore is a passive and unnecessary figure, serving only to distract the reader by recalling the loose threads of the first plot.

Novelists can be kindly men and are capable of gratitude. Mr. Bell does not forget the patience with which his Mr. Passmore submits to standing in as an "extra" in a thriller instead of playing the promised lead in a romance. He rewards him at the top of the last page by writing and publishing two books for him and, at the bottom, by marrying him to the loveliest woman in Seathorpe, which is far more than the hero of a modern novel expects.

**EDWARD F. MEADE: *Remember Me*.** Faber & Faber. 8s. 6d.

Much of the descriptive detail in Mr. Meade's novel, which pursues the circumstances of a Canadian soldier in England from the winter of 1940 onwards and during the first phase of the invasion of Normandy, leaves the impression of a fairly direct transcription of personal experience. The story loosely fitted within this descriptive framework is not very substantial. Corporal O'Rourke, a farmer in civilian life (a not very convincing farmer), says good-bye to his wife Gerda at Yellow Prairie and longs constantly for her afterwards. He travels by troop-train across the Canadian continent, sails to England in a great liner, experiences two or three air raids in the south, is critical and disapproving of much that he observes in this country (some of his comments, perhaps, are on the crude side), and grows bored and restless in normal barrack-room fashion. Mr. Meade makes a great deal of O'Rourke's feelings for his wife, but does not in fact persuade the reader that they have any depth. O'Rourke has various affairs with other women, for a time is reluctant to read Gerda's letters, reviews the course of the war, reverts to the rank of private, is engaged in training exercises before the invasion, resumes his exalted passion for Gerda, is made a corporal again, and is killed near Caen.

Mr. Meade is by no means without ability, and his opening pages in particular promise something more than a flow of accurately rendered observation. But he is, as yet, too obviously untrained as a writer and too much in love with expressions of high sentiment. His sentences are apt to be overloaded, adjectival to excess and rhetorical, while even in more commonplace moments he is in the habit of committing to words what is best taken for granted. The book is marked by a sense of civilian wonder, into which a reading of "*War and Peace*" has plainly entered, at the collective being and identity of armies, and exhibits also, though often in a scratchy way, the workings of the author's Canadian patriotism.