

A Question of Manner

The Sun Doctor. By Robert Shaw. (Chatto and Windus, 16s.)

Two for the River. By L. P. Hartley. (Hamish Hamilton, 15s.)

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal. By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph, 15s.)

Any Advance? By Geoffrey Johns. (Hutchinson, 16s.)

To start by asking how much the Miltonism of *Thyrsis* or *The Scholar-Gipsy* detracts from either poem may seem remote; but there is an exactly parallel question to be asked of *The Sun Doctor*. It is told so well that a quick read leaves one impressed and surprised, hazarding that an imagination has been at work. The sun doctor, Benjamin Halliday, stumbles through his swamp; he has served in a medical mission, and life is vanity, his own being a tin which feels empty and has never been opened. But he does explore himself slowly, in the swamps of Manda among a neurotic people, in the swamp of London, which he visits to receive a knighthood. He recognises our one pattern—of inconsistencies. He recognises a purpose, 'to make one's way through the contradictions,' to accept them, and to serve. From the sense of vanity, from London, he goes back to Africa, to the peculiar people he found in the swamp who serve chieftains suffering from an inherited inability to sweat. The chiefs compel the healthy commons to work for them and pour the necessary water over them, and make them believe that they too share the disease. He takes his share, he pours the water, no tidy Utopia is possible, oppressed must help the oppressor. The swamp people's poem says that when we die the wind necessarily blows dust over our footsteps.

The swamp people are this novel's *tour de force*, realised in mind, being and milieu. Superficially it is a good read. My second thought—which returns me to the opening question—is that Mr. Shaw has written very ably, in the Conrad manner, a backward-looking, second-hand piece of defeatism. As the rather primrose was vulgarised into dark bluebells drench'd with dews of summer, so the hot coppery penumbra of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* has been transformed into the hot, sweaty light of the swamp of those who cannot sweat. A mannerist novel, then, as Arnold's were mannerist poems, with the consequential weaknesses and demerits. I dare say it is something to follow Conrad; though if there is to be following, one might by this time prefer, for example, that Camus, reverend sire, came footing slow into our latter-day novels (though analysis of *The Sun Doctor* may reveal at any rate a pinch of the existential, together with dabs of Golding).

I don't know Mr. L. P. Hartley's novels, though of course I know they are well spoken of. But these stories! After reading them to the end, macabre stories which do not chill, character stories as humorous as social comedy along Shaftesbury Avenue, I must characterise them as elongated, soft, slow, badly written (ranks are serried, triumphs short-lived, targets favourite, conventions flouted and pens laid aside), and exceedingly vulgar—in a bland confidence that they are always far from vulgar. An example. There is a Venetian story moving from the right family commonplace, via a party, to the rightly appalling end. But since the people are froth, and since the milieu is constructed only by knowing murmurs of *calle, pali, sala, terrazza*, and the *Maringona*, since the contraries are not established, the appalling end is an end to nothing, and so doesn't appal. I read these flannelette tales just after seeing Ionesco's *Bald-headed Primadonna*.

If every person in that play could be changed by a wicked uncle into a short story, here they would all be, unconsciously indulging their nothingness.

The question I cannot answer is whether Mr. Hartley goes all to bits because he is short-storying instead of writing a novel. Mr. Bates's proper form is the short story, in which he is sensuous and efficient, nipping about in this new collection from Midland pubs to Tahiti, lusciousness of girls to pathos of retired colonels. If these stories were indexed analytically, entries would include eccentricity; *cheu fugaces*; flowers, dewiness of; lagoons, blueness of; love, dream of, eternity of, transience of; man, mortality of; regret, wild with all; snows, roseate. Allowing that he deals in easy sentiment and that he enlarges the cliché to a story while avoiding it in a phrase, it must be said that his tales give considerable pleasure, arising from swiftness, neatness, freshness, and a sensual way of catching at 'hoglike snorts of laughter,' a 'bald nutty head' or the 'black eyes of a yellow crab.'

Any Advance? overrides its demerit by having a subject to pursue and exhibit—the life and passion of antique dealers and the proper conduct of secondary auctions, i.e. of the Ring. Instead of an H. A. Vachell sentimentality (*Quinneys*, to those who remember) here is a different sentimentality proper to our own times of grab; in brief, a cynical textbook of how to deal, in which auction follows auction, tappers get a foot inside the door, and success cunningly succeeds, in the self-elevation of Willy Shaun from rags and bones to a smart antique business—an elevation which goes ahead so smartly and ruthlessly, with such zest and with so much revelation, that one hardly notices how stilted the talk and situations really are.

GEOFFREY GRIGSON

It's a Crime

The Half Hunter. By John Sherwood. (Gollancz, 13s. 6d.) One would never know it from the wrapper or the flyleaf, but this is by an experienced and versatile author, whose last admirable thriller (different publisher, of course) was set in a British embassy in the Near East. This disports itself among the detached villas and ice-rinks of our own South Coast resorts, where a boy is caught up, between school and Oxford, with a seventeen-year-old popsy who may or may not be delinquent, and some characters straight out of the Sunday papers—a very lively read and a very skilfully contrived puzzle, by one of the most accomplished and plausible English crime-story writers to appear since Michael Gilbert wrote *Fear to Tread*.

The Dead Past. By Jean Scholey. (Heinemann, 16s.) A philandering adventurer is found dead in a Land-Rover in a remote corner of Tanganyika, and the District Commissioner has to find out who did it, and why: African or European; because of illicit diamond-buying or a long-ago love affair? Not particularly brisk or suspenseful, but agreeably well written, with the East Africa of *Boma* and Club, of Indian trader, *askari* and colonial civil servant especially well done, and a good twist to the plot. Altogether, a very professional début.

Killing at the Big Tree. By David McCarthy. (Heinemann, 13s. 6d.) White woman is killed in small Southern town where, whenever there has been a murder before, a Negro has paid for it. New sheriff is determined to find out who, in fact, did this one, black or white, before a Negro is lynched for it by poor whites, neurotic and bloody-minded because of race-hate and thunder heat. Detection neatly worked out, under heavy cloud of steamy malice.

Marnie. By Winston Graham. (Hodder and Stoughton, 16s.) Long, immensely readable character study of young woman thief, a-moral as to her employers' pay-rolls, but highly puritanical as to her favours. It may be that both the light fingers and the sexual primness have their origins in her psyche, and Winston Graham explores it thoroughly (as though in the girl's own words) in a crime novel with no violence, considerable suspense, and of great distinction.

The Accused. By Harold R. Daniels. (Deutsch, 12s. 6d.) Grim courtroom story, with the evidence gradually revealing, and the accused's memories echoing in greater depth, the relationship between husband and wife that led inevitably to death. An extremely skilful double-narrative psychological suspense story, with undertones of compassion, and tremendous grip.

The Premier and Maigret in Court. By Simonon. (Hamish Hamilton, 12s. 6d. each.) The one is little more than a character sketch of an ageing—indeed, a dying—French politician, determined that his obvious successor shall not, in fact, succeed, and cherishing the papers that would ruin him. In the other, Maigret watches, in court, an accused man slip through the meshes of circumstantial evidence, and then encourages him to go beyond the law and kill the killer. The Simonon cult is all very well, but these *contes* are thin indeed, and 12s. 6d. is a lot to pay for fewer than a couple of hundred pages of extremely big type: the two tales together would have made no more than a reasonable fifteen shillings' worth. Full marks, though, for uncommonly effective jacket designs, by Youngman Carter—one of them after Daumier, who would have been just the illustrator for Simonon.

CYRIL RAY

COMPANY MEETING

LUBOK INVESTMENTS LIMITED

REVENUE AGAIN INCREASED

The 44th annual general meeting of Lubok Investments Limited was held on May 15 in London BRIGADIER F. C. HOPTON SCOTT, C.B.E. (the chairman), presiding.

The following is his circulated statement: As foreshadowed in my speech a year ago, a bonus issue, on a 1-for-1 basis, was made last November with a view to bringing the issued capital more into line with the net assets of the Company. Following upon the "rights" issue in the preceding month this had the effect of raising the issued capital from £18,000 a year ago to today's £48,000.

Gross Investment income in the past year has risen to £19,811 against £16,786. However, against this higher revenue there was an increase in interest charges on borrowed money amounting to £2,077 incurred before the "rights" issue was made. This results in a net profit, before taxation, for 1960 of £13,675 against £12,957 in the preceding year.

Your Board has much pleasure in recommending a final dividend of 15 per cent. payable on the increased capital of £48,000. The interim dividend of 25 per cent. was paid on the old capital of £18,000. Together these represent an increase over the 1959 dividends totalling 50 per cent. paid on a capital of £18,000.

The year 1960 saw an overall fall in the value of industrial ordinary shares on the London Stock Exchange and our own portfolio suffered a proportionate fall in consequence. Aided by the "rights" issue net assets of the Company, however, had expanded at the year end to £348,214 giving a net asset value per 6d. stock unit of approximately 3s. 7d.

The report and accounts were adopted.