BOOKS OF THE DAY — *Edited by E. B*

The Drowsy Syrups of Wit

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S TOO BEAUTIFUL NEW NOVEL

By H. E. BATES

The Years. By Virginia Woolf. (Hogarth Press. 8s. 6d.)
Theatre. By Somerset Maugham. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d.)

For some years Mrs. Woolf's name was the Password: the password, that is, to the innermost, precious-lilied altars of the Higher Church of the Higher Order of the most High Intelligentsia. To be able to discuss her, even though you did not and perhaps could not read her, was the hall-mark, all through the 'twenties, of the liberal education. Earlier, her novels, introducing a new and strange manner, had not always found such hushed favour ("... seems to have mistaken literature for mathematics" ... "she gushes drivel" ... "a book without style or coherence" ...) but once the fashion was set nothing could stop the Philistines from flocking to kneel devotedly on the plush hassocks of the new order. Mrs. Woolf became something more than a writer; she became a cult, a little religion. What proportion of these who murmured the creeds, I wonder, ever understood them?

Mrs. Woolf is a difficult writer; she at once makes powerful and almost equal demands on the senses and the intelligence. From the one she demands attention to a style that unrolls itself in endless velveteen monotonies, in sweet suede cadences; a style that as time goes on has the effect of stupefying and almost nullifying the senses with its peculiar drowsy beauty. After 50 pages or so of "THE YEARS," for instance, beauty—Mrs. Woolf's beauty—begins to be too much with us. The velveteen unrolls and unrolls without a change in its luxuriousness of texture, always beautiful, almost too beautiful, beautiful almost at times to a point of boredom, so carefully manufactured, and so finished, that you begin to long, very soon, for the sight and touch of some honest bit of sackcloth. Lulling you half to sleep with her style, Mrs. Woolf at the same time demands a supreme wakefulness of the intelligence for the proper appreciation of her wit. She is a satirist comparable, in the sly slightness of her touch, with Jane Austen; but like Jane she must not mind if half the world's ears are tuned to catch the tones rather than the semi-tones of style. All satirists, from Swift downward, are liable to the same fate. Mrs. Woolf is doubly liable because she is sensuous as well as satirical. It is not our fault if we do not always see the needles hidden in the velveteen.

"The Velveteen is Panoramic"

Her new novel is a beautiful, too beautiful piece of work. In contrast to her formerly intricate cross-section manner, "The Years" is almost straightforward in method, a chronicle of the lives of a large group of people from 1880 down to our own times. It is almost Mrs. Woolf's "Forsyte Saga." A longish book, it is the picture not merely of a group, but of an age. The velveteen is panoramic. It always has been panoramic, of course, but here it is imprinted with something more than the intricate fussy Virginian details of intimate daily life; it bears in it the impress of the larger forces of war and politics and love and death that shape life and society. It is, I repeat, a beautiful book; but it is a book, also, written by a woman with gloves on. As a novelist Mrs. Woolf has never soiled her hands, just as she has never really moved out of her symbolical room with a view. Those gloves and that room have cut her off from somewhere about seven-tenths of life. She is an intellectual aristocrat, a Twentieth Century blue-stocking, a talent coddled in the velveteen of culture. If only, one feels, she could have been a little crude, a little vulgar, a little common. If only she would have taken off the gloves! Then "The Years," considerable book though it is, might have been—but there is no knowing what it might have been.

The Lost Mr. Maugham

If we weep for the lost Mrs. Woolf, we must shed equal tears, I think, for the lost Mr. Maugham. Somewhere between "Of Human Bondage" and "Cakes and Ale," there died a considerable novelist, perhaps a great novelist, not to speak of a satirist of some consequence. Mr. Maugham is a man who has taught himself the art of writing. In an intelligent, level-headed, top-of-the-class way he has learnt his lesson, and has passed his examinations. The result is that now, as revealed in "THEATRE," and still more in "Cakes and Ale," he is a very admirable, attractive writer, with a style as sharp and clear—and just about as hard—as glass. He now has all the virtues—style, clarity, dignity, wit, tolerance, intelligence, &c., &c.—with the exception of one. He has no heart. Where his heart should be there is a mechanical instrument. His heart would work, and work well, but Mr. Maugham is afraid of it. Being a wise novelist, he is wary of the heart-beat in fiction. Emotion, yes—but heart-beat, no. Heart-beats are all very well for novelists like Miss Dell, but not for novelists like Mr. Maugham. So Mr. Maugham is continually careful to use this mechanical instrument instead of his heart, in which way he hopes to achieve a restrained emotion, but to avoid sentimentalism. So much for the hopes of the top-of-the-class novelist. All he succeeds in doing is the reverse. For Mr. Maugham can be the most heartless of novelists and the most appalling of sentimentalists. ("Her heart melted within her when she looked into his deep, friendly eyes, and she shivered with delightful anguish when she considered his shining russet hair.") Mr. Maugham or Miss Dell? The answer is Mr. Maugham.

The emotions are Julia Lambert's, actress, heroine of "Theatre." The book is a portrait of this despicable woman, who to her public is a great (and virtuous) actress, but who is in private life utterly selfish, steeped in amorous duplicity, and as hard as the page of glass on which Mr. Maugham portrays her. It is an extraordinary portrait: frank, merciless, repellent, but fascinating. Full marks go to Mr. Maugham for his success in creating this heartless portrait, while at the same time keeping us fascinated by the subject of it. "Theatre" is, in its class, absolutely first-class. But I weep when I think of the class in which it might have been.

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TO-DAY'S BOOKS

LOUIS XVI. AND MARIE ANTOINETTE. By Nesta H. Webster. 18s. Constable.
OFFICIAL HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR OF 1914-1918. Vol. 10. 18s. Angus and Robertson.
SEVEN SAINTS. by Eleanor Farjeon, and LITTLE BLACK ANT. by Alice Crew Gall and Fleming H. Crew. 6s. Oxford University Press.
WRITING FOR THE B.B.C. By Max Kester and Edwin Collier. 2s. Pitman.

EXTINCT VOLCANO

The Clown and Mrs. Fellows. By Marjorie Jeans. (Cresset Press. 7s. 6d.)

Mrs. Fellows is one of those indistinguishable people of an uncertain age who have ceased to be of the slightest interest to the world or even to herself. We meet her in a room on the fifth floor where small comforts are automatically provided, and she can enjoy the loneliness which is to her the height of luxury. She is trying to face a sudden reduction in her income which will leave her too poor to enjoy any such amenities.

In the night fire breaks out, and she is trapped, and while descending from her floor to the entrance hall the whole drama of her life is mystically unfolded as in a dream. It is as though a long extinct volcano had revived its fire and energy for a few immortal moments. But the existing Mrs. Fellows is only a spectator of all she has been in living and loving, and the Clown, representing the incongruity of human affairs, is the silent, urgent producer of the play. Something like the other-worldly atmosphere of, say, "Peter Ibbetson" is created, and our wonder whether she will escape adds a strange sense of tension.

This is a really remarkable first novel which, arriving at ultimate reality through unreal scenes, by implication shows how love can cast out fear.

E. B. O.