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and moving narrative, and where to smile and to drop an obligatory tear. For instance, those espousals in the wood. . . ? Plausible heroines are not Mr. Talbot's forte; on the other hand, when he is describing the Crimean War, particularly the battle on the heights of Inkerman, he scores a conspicuous success. *The Centaur Passes* is fantasy from beginning to end; the centaur takes the first jump with graceful aplomb—his birth in a famous English racing-stables—but comes to grief in the neighbourhood of page fifty. The subsequent adventures of this proud demi-god degenerate into heavy-handed satire. Satirical, too, is the theme of *Asses in Clover*; admirers of *King Goshawk and the Birds* may relish this last chapter of King Goshawk's life, and, if I failed, I am prepared to believe that the fault is mine. A personal prejudice against neo-Celtic fairy tales, when combined with an economic and social message, may have robbed me of an unsuspected satisfaction.

Prejudices, after all, are a reviewer's stand-by; at most, he can attempt to explain their origin and arrange them in some logical and consecutive order. Miss Antonia White's novel, *Frost in May*, has—at any rate—for one reader of the book, the supreme virtue of doing what it sets out to do and never exceeding the limits of its modest design. The impression it makes is sharp and decisive. Nanda Grey entered a convent-school at the age of nine; the story covers her life till the age of fourteen, when she left the Convent of the Five Wounds in deep disgrace, having rebelled against the austerity of Catholic discipline. At bottom, it is the story of a prolonged love-affair—of the relationship, now passionate and now refractory, now benevolent, now repressive and subtly cruel, between a human being and a dominant institution. Nanda loves and hates the Catholic Church; the atmosphere, even the aroma, of the convent buildings—compounded of beeswax and yellow soap, and the faint, lingering, sickly smell of incense—in which Nanda passed her impressionable years, the personalities of the various mistresses and of Nanda's friends all reached me with extraordinary distinctness as I turned the pages. I can only add that, of these oddly assorted volumes, not excepting Mr. Powys's mountainous myth, *Frost in May* has given me the greatest pleasure.

PETER QUENNELL

THE OLD FIRM

Circus Company. By EDWARD SEAGO. With a preface by JOHN MASEFIELD. *Putnam*. 10s. 6d.

When I was a small boy and theatrical companies visited the town, bringing flash-looking ladies with scarlet lips and wicked earrings, and I used to beg to be allowed to go to see them play, my mother used to say with dark finality, "It's a drama: you wouldn't understand it." But when the bill-poster went round and stuck up gay-placards announcing the coming of Sanger's or Barnum's or one of those obscure dingy little circuses of which Mr. Seago speaks so affectionately there never used to be any doubt or disapproval and still less any "You wouldn't understand it." It was obvious that we should understand it; indeed, a circus was all so vivid and elemental that it hardly needed to be understood. It needed only to be accepted. From the brilliance of the early afternoon procession of elephants and clowns and horses and ladies and lions through the streets to the last hoarse jokes of the clowns and the blast of the scarlet-coated band playing *Tarra-ra-boom-de-ay* and *All the nice girls love a sailor*, it was all pure enjoyment. We went to the circus almost as automatically as we went to church; and it is significant that we all went, children, parents and grandparents. And when the clowns cracked a joke our parents and grandparents said they'd heard it donkey's years ago, laughing fit to cry even as they said it. To-day the loud-speaker, replacing the scarlet band, plays tunes that were hot the day before yesterday, *Ain't she sweet?* and *I can't give you anything but love, Baby*, but the clowns crack the same staunch jokes and fool with the old, old water-buckets, the horses are as silky and beautiful as ever, the ladies in pink tights are as ravishing, the ring-master as dashing, the acrobats as marvellous, the smell of horse-dung and sweet and trampled grass as powerful—so powerful that it alone indeed brings back the memory of childhood with joy and pain. The circus, in short, does not change. It is the old firm, full of imperishable pageantry and life. "To those with imagination," says Mr. Masefield in his preface to Mr. Seago's book, "it is a delight that does not lessen much with age." I doubt if it lessens at all.

Mr. Seago is a painter. After living a life of ease, painting the horses on which he hunted, he suddenly decided to follow the

circus, not in order to take part in any of its acts, but simply to paint and study its animals and people. At first he detested it all, the circus, the circus people, the wretched lodgings in which he was offered watery rice-puddings, tinned salmon and "smaller species of shell-fish." The circus people were standoffish, would stand for their portraits only after much difficulty, and spoke a slang language of their own which he could not understand. He was a toff; they were men—artists—with work to do. For months they treated him with disdain, obviously thinking him as green as he very probably was. But he persisted, and finally they warmed to him, inviting him to muck in with them and share their life. He mucked in and shared their life as fully as it was possible for an outsider to do, learning their language, suffering their poverty and hardship and acquiring their love and friendship. The result is *Circus Company*.

There have been few, if any, great books on circus life. The novelist sentimentalises it all, and few commentators have gone, like Mr. Seago, into the very heart of the life and suffered there. The fair occurs again and again in literature. But not the circus. The two would seem to be related, both in their elemental vigour and romantic pageantry, yet, as Mr. Seago says: "I drew so fine a line between the gipsy and the fair-ground, the fair-ground and the circus, that they were divided only by the merest tracing. In this I was mistaken. Later, when I knew their life, I learned the difference between them." He discusses this difference and in doing so indicates why the circus has never been truly interpreted by any artist except the painter:

To many the Circus appears as a travelling variety-show for the amusement of the poor. Others think it a show of glorified gypsies, with raw-boned nags and decayed adornment. No outsider knows it as it is. Its people stand apart; they are Circus folk. Circus people on the whole keep to themselves, and seldom mix with others. As their life is spent in wandering, they remain mysterious. . . . The smaller the show the more harshly is it judged, so that some of the "smaller fry" are regarded as little better than vagabonds and mountebanks.

Mr. Seago's book, in spite of its occasional sentimentalities and journalese, will do much to dispel these ideas. If only his writing were as good as his sixteen pencil sketches, and if only his sixteen pencil sketches were paintings instead, like his frontispiece, *Circus Company* might have been sixteen times the book it is. Even so, it is a book to keep, not so much for oneself as for one's children. For, as Mr. Masefield remarks: "I do not doubt that to countless children still the circus is the greatest of all joys, and circus life the image of Paradise." H. E. BATES

PROLETARIANS ALL

New Country: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry. By the Authors of *New Signatures*. Edited by MICHAEL ROBERTS. *Hogarth Press*. 7s. 6d.

The Magnetic Mountain. By C. DAY LEWIS. *Hogarth Press*. 3s. 6d.

New Country is, roughly speaking, a Communist anthology. The attitude of its contributors is, roughly, Shelleyan: the world is made up of tyrants, slaves, and a few heralds of the millennium. Like the elder "post-war poet" they have not much contact with the life around them, and certainly very little with the "masses." But then Shelley thought the masses were to be raised, not that they were already on a pinnacle: so his lack of contact did not exactly put him in a false position. It is different with Mr. Roberts, Mr. Day Lewis, Mr. Auden and the rest: and some of them appear uneasily conscious of the fact. "The artist," Mr. Spender points out in self-defence, "cannot renounce the bourgeois tradition because the proletariat has no alternative tradition which he could adopt." (Which he *could* adopt—like a new kind of hat, apparently.) "The art which is being and which can be created to-day is not in any sense proletarian art." He means "liked by the proletariat," and backs his assertion with the forceful argument that they did not care for D. H. Lawrence. And certainly, if another Dickens should arise it will not be in the *New Country* tradition. To be liked by the masses you must, in the first place, like or at least feel for what they like: and, secondly, you must have some natural exuberance. Mr. Roberts and his friends hate what the masses like, and though they are all in favour of exuberance, they seem to have put it off till the millennium: their present psychological state is queasy. Moreover, they are a little uncertain—Mr. Roberts especially—what they really want: whether the new religion is or is not "personal."