Art and Anecdote

A Beginning and Other Stories. By Walter da la Mare. (Faber, 12s. 6d.)

The Daffodil Sky. By H. E. Bates. (Michael Joseph, 12s. 6d.)

The Moment Before the Rain. By Elizabeth Enright. (Heinemann, 12s. 6d.)

The Bay is Not Naples. By Anna Maria Ortese. (Collins, 10s. 6d.)

The Sandwiches are Waiting. And Other Stories. By Jane McClure. (Collins, 10s. 6d.)

The Laundry Girl and the Pole. And Other Stories. By Fred Urquhart. (Arco, 9s. 6d.)

The Captain's Woman. By Neil Bell. (Alvin Redman, 12s. 6d.)

At seventeen I sampled some of Walter de la Mare's stories and decided: No. Too much moonlight for me, and those wispy people peering and creeping, listening and hinting. His new book, *A Beginning and Other Stories*, changed my mind and sent me out to buy the earlier *Best Stories*, an excellent bargain at six shillings.

Mr. de la Mare's prose abounds in those risky words young writers are cautioned against — 'indescribable,' 'inscrutable,' 'strange'—but he wins belief by a supple employment of anti-climax and a cunning attention to Miss Seaton's thick hair, for instance, or her enormous, greasy dinners. Eerie elegance is continually played off against lumpish commonplace. The deeper note that Mr. de la Mare's fantasies all strike is that of loneliness. 'An Ideal Craftsman,' under the hastier fingers of Saki, would be a smart little anecdote; instead, after the fat murderess has gone, 'clammy and stupid and ridiculous,' the boy's final cry aches in the reader's mind; the isolation of these characters, once noticed, is terrible.

A common theme of what people do with their aloneness unites the new collection and saves several stories hardly robust enough

to stand alone, though all are beautifully worked. But the best one could hold its own anywhere. 'The Face' appears to a girl struggling up from near-drowning in a dark pond. She accepts the incident and goes home; the rest of the tale explores its meaning for her as she sits through a raucous family tea next day and escapes for a walk with her fiancé. Here, instead of trying to make our flesh creep, Mr. de la Mare has quietly used the brief interruption from Outside to light up an ordinary life. Only a master could have written it.

None of these other collections has this imprint of a unique mind, but the fun of reading books of stories is that you can leaf through Mr. H. E. Bates's unassuming, creamy love-stories, gradually losing hope of finding anything but well-turned magazine products, and then come upon two sharp portraits of eccentricity, 'The Evolution of Saxby' and 'The Common Denominator.' There is a milder pleasure in watching Miss Elizabeth Enright smuggle glints of exact perception into the complacent *New Yorker* formulas of neglected children and suburban *weltschmerz*. 'Flight to the Islands' is a good example of what she can do—carry you along on a brief trip and return you slightly refreshed and entirely unshaken.

The Bay is Not Naples is more chronicle than fiction. Six of the eight pieces aren't stories at all, but static friezes or dark ruminations on post-war dishevelment. The two formal stories are good. They suggest that Signorina Ortese may find a way to organise her anger and authentic journalist's power.

Miss Jane McClure is a new writer, American, who is also feeling her way. Her ear isn't very exact, and her outstanding failures are the title-story and two others which purport to be monologues. (Try saying aloud, '"Francis!" I called, running after him.') Like Miss Enright, she tries some neglected-children stories, but pathos isn't in her. A pitiless ingenuity is her trump card. A bleak, machine-tooled, psychiatric chiller, 'Dark Interlude,' probably shows where her future will lie.

Mr. Urquhart's title-story, 'The Laundry Girl and the Pole,' is fifteen years old, but new to me. Except for two unwelcome wireless announcer's intrusions ('The Netties and Jans of this world are legion. . . .'), I was held by his Scottish girls jabbering in a laundry, going to the cinema, applying mascara by the mirror over the kitchen sink and meeting their soldiers in the rain. This story is touching, and the sixty pages don't seem long. But in shorter pieces Mr. Urquhart seems clumsy—a novelist whose stories tend to fall out as chunks of thick detail ('Elephants, Bairns, and Old Men') or else coarse summaries ('I Fell For a Sailor').

Finally, we have Mr. Neil Bell, who is shameless. For me his *chef d'œuvre* was 'The Thousand and Second Night,' since there he achieves his highest concentration of the preposterous within a single story: escape from a sunken submarine, 'a crank or a quack or perhaps a genius' who can reconstruct human lungs, a Spanish beauty wooed and won with a chorus of 'Drink to Me Only With Thine Eyes,' an encounter with one of Hitler's deputies—all in a dozen pages. To be fair, I must say that I found this trash as insidious as salted peanuts. Mr. Somerset Maugham, grumbling about the influence of Chekhov, has sometimes referred wistfully to the first story-tellers around their prehistoric camp fires. If anecdote is enough, here is a cave-man after Mr. Maugham's heart.

WALTER CLEMONS

New Novels

ACHILLES HIS ARMOUR. By Peter Green. (John Murray, 15s.)
THE DOVES OF VENUS. By Olivia Manning. (Heinemann, 13s. 6d.)
ADAM, WHERE ART THOU? By Heinrich Boll. (Arco, 12s. 6d.)
THE GRAY CAPTAIN. By Jere Wheelwright. (Cassell, 12s. 6d.)

'To Shakbat and his seed, the males, for ever.' So reads the dedication of a tomb on the hillside above Palmyra, in stark non-classical contrast to the tall Corinthian colonnades that so delighted the eighteenth century. The words imply a warning against two popular fallacies, a warning which applies in some degree to Mr. Peter Green's lightly fictionalised life of Alcibiades. 'Remember first,' an archaic voice is telling us, 'that in spite of our columns and cornices, in spite of the Hellenic fads of our queen Zenobia, we are desert Semites here. We worship Baal and grow rich on camel caravans. We do not think like Plato or Aristotle or Zeno or Epicurus, nor yet like Virgil or Cicero or Hadrian. We were no more transfigured by words spoken in Athens than by the spears of Alexander, and if you will look up and down the lands and centuries of the classical antiquity you dream about, you will find much, not only in Tyre and Carthage but also in Latium and Thessaly and Arcadia, that is anything but classical. Remember second, that even in full maturity our ancient world, despite the skills of hand and brain that still dazzle you, was in spirit far less modern than some of your novelists seem to suppose. It is rash and seriously misleading to liken a later Roman *eques* to a stock-broker, an old sophist's pathic to a flighty undergraduate, or an Athenian war archon to a brigadier. It is sometimes as well to recall the points of resemblance between a Spartan *mora* and a Zulu *impi*. . . .' How does *Achilles his Armour*, drawing heavily as it does on Plutarch and Thucydides, emerge in the light of these maxims? Not badly by any means, though not as well as Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Well served by historic sources, we follow the Peloponnesian War from beginning to end. Most of the infinitely complicated strategic and diplomatic detail reads excellently—though it is odd to find Melos, who paid for her resistance to Athenian demands in massacre and slavery, described as a free ally—and the hideous compact little battles,