

Effective Melodrama

THE ROAD TO HEAVEN. By THOMAS BEER.
New York: ALFRED A. KNOPF. 1928. \$2.50.

Reviewed by THEODORE PURDY, JR.

AFTER "The Mauve Decade" it is something of a relief to find that the sharp talent of Thomas Beer, so much better adapted to narratives than to the leisurely and often questionable affairs of history, is not, after all, to be turned away from novel writing. Mr. Beer has written not merely a novel (and his best one), but a modern novel. New York a decade after the war, with its immensities and its emptiness of real living, is the admirably rendered scene against which his people carry out their well contrived melodrama.

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For "The Road to Heaven" is essentially a melodrama, and an extremely effective one. As usual in Mr. Beer's books and stories, the hero might be described as a pseudo-naïve tough guy. Lamon Coe, veteran of the war and ex-pugilist, driven from his home town by his father because of a minor sexual peccadillo, is rather proud of his lack of education, and is most certainly proud of his strength. He is an admirable American type of the moment, provided with a considerable background and with the longing to return to that background of an Ohio farm. He has been uprooted, "déraciné" as Barrès put it, and as the book begins he has become a tramp, wandering the continent, working for a short time in one city, passing on to another. Finally he even descends to taking money from a drunken college boy. With this money he comes to New York, where he has a cousin, Abner Coe, who forms a neat contrast to his personality. Abner is in the book business, but he is not a mere bookseller or publisher. His life is devoted to furnishing the rare fortunes of the world with rare literary possessions, in the manner of Mr. Rosenbach. His friends are clever, and Lamon does not care for them. The third element in Mr. Beer's triangle of personalities is Frankie De Lima, ex-actress, former mistress of Abner Coe, mistress-to-be of Lamon. Her murder is the satisfactorily melodramatic climax of the book. Mr. Beer has chosen to kill two other persons in the last few pages of "The Road to Heaven" without materially improving the effect of the whole. But his ending, which sends Lamon back to his farm with a charming, if not very interesting wife, seems suited to his principal character, and is convincing enough.

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In the important and vexed matter of Mr. Beer's style it is a pleasure to report that the excessively involved cinematic phrases of "The Mauve Decade" have yielded to a simpler and equally vivid manner. There are still moments when his sentences seem to go abruptly astray, or are forced into the Procrustean bed of artificiality. He can still be as difficult as this:

There must be thousands of fellows all over the country who knew Ranulph. Being a person like that was to be a town in which men had spent a week.

And at other times as naively descriptive as this:

Everywhere earth was turned up in fields and gardens. Men in Bridgeport were looking at little plots and staring at vines on porches before they started off to work in factories. Birds passed against the sky and there was a smell of dung from barnyards outside all these towns. One place an old horse with scarlet sores on its back had been sent out to graze under apple trees that showed signs of bud.

Both are surely better than the elaboracies of his previous book. His tendency in his shorter stories to bring in too many characters, to spend too much time over the telling bits of action, while neglecting the form of the whole story, has also begun to disappear. "The Road to Heaven" is not perfect as to form, but it is a vast improvement on "Sandoval," in which one was never quite sure of the period, nor of the character being presented. His other book, "The Fair Rewards," was an unusual first novel but nothing more. Mr. Beer has not yet succeeded in finding a subject which really interests him very much. He is occupied with the people and the atmosphere and the climax of "The Road to Heaven," but he appears to realize that there is little of great literary significance at the heart of the thing. His people live and love with an astonishing immediacy, but there is as yet no directing force back of them other than the author's desire to make them live as part of a story. Just beyond the ex-

cellencies of Mr. Beer's present accomplishment lies the realm containing everything that is really important in writing. One hopes and believes that Mr. Beer will soon enter it.

A Large Canvas

THE BATTLE OF THE HORIZONS. By SYLVIA THOMPSON. Boston: Little, Brown and Co. 1928. \$2.50.

Reviewed by GRACE FRANK

IN all the good senses of the word, this is an old-fashioned novel. Miss Thompson can create plausible characters, make them behave both convincingly and divertingly, weave into their lives keen observations and thoughts worth the thinking. Her critical attitude toward these creatures of her own fashioning is mellow rather than caustic, and toward the world in which they move, hopeful rather than disillusioned. She is as unafraid of large themes as of the large and sometimes unwieldy canvas upon which she is obliged to plot them. For those gentlefolk, therefore, whose ears and noses have been offended by the raucous and malodorous qualities of more obviously modern fiction, and whose faith has been wounded by the pedestalling of futility and exploitation of mediocrity, here is a novel of considerable charm.

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Like "The Little French Girl," though less completely and less successfully, it juxtaposes two civilizations and attempts to see each through the eyes of exponents of the other. In this case, a beautiful American girl, Athene Reid, a blend of efficiency and inadequacy, of vaguely romantic aspirations and definitely selfish practices, marries a sensitive Englishman and goes with him to his home near Melbury. For a moment we see Athene's mother, a "mummification of youthful elegance and good looks," and her father, "the Harvard graduate grown old but not grown up," silhouetted against Geoffrey's background, the shabby, comfortable country house in which, wrestling with post-war economies, his delightful family lives. Presently we meet this family: the old baronet, a Member of Parliament, who "hunts, speaks three languages badly, reads his classics over and over again, and fumes over the newspapers every morning"; his wife with her poised tolerance and understanding; their eldest daughter, Patricia, a high-strung, artistic girl, torn between the man who wants to marry her and the man she loves but cannot have; Clifford, the happy-go-lucky youngest son, and Bobs, his twin sister, an uncompromising little Bolshevik who remains rebellious until she forgets most of her principles in a happy marriage. These people greet the bride with mingled warmth and casualness, and Athene, sentimentally predisposed to love England, grows enthusiastic over everything from the English Constitution (of which, she gravely tells Sir Charles, she "made a study while doing economics and sociology at college") to the "quaint" tub in Yoxall's single bathroom where Bobs has recently been washing her dog.

But Athene's romantic regard for her new environment in no wise prepares her to live in it or understand it. She generalizes grandly about freedom and self-expression; she turns the nurseries of her "arty" London house into a large hall destined for meetings; she tries to drive Geoffrey with his studious habits and worship of leisure into meaningless activities and a political career that he cannot afford. Her ambitions for him are as vague and superficial as for herself. Finally, she drifts into an indiscreet friendship with a bitter, cynical young novelist "whose antagonism to the sentimental was undermined by pity for his own disillusionment." Disaster follows, and Athene is eventually obliged to chuck her nebulous and selfish ideals and battle with realities.

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Not unreasonably, the English scenes and people in this book are more convincing than the American. Natasha Wells, the self-styled "Harp Poetess from Oklahoma," is a crude caricature, and Miss Thompson's knowledge of the American idiom, though more accurate than Mr. Galsworthy's, is not impeccable. A more serious defect is a certain lack of sharpness in the outlines of the tale. Insufficient correlation between the central and subsidiary themes tends to shift the emphasis and disperse the

reader's interest. It must also be confessed that Patricia and Bobs pale disappointingly before the end and that Athene, static for much of the tale, leaves us inadequately prepared for her development at the close. Indeed the last third of the novel slips perceptibly from the higher standard set by the beginning, and one feels that all of it might advisedly have been subjected to a longer period of incubation.

Yet most of the figures, even the minor ones, are admirably visualized, the various groups are cohesively composed, and each incident in itself is consistent. Miss Thompson manages her dialogues exceptionally well: the clever people speak cleverly, the superficial ones are adroitly made to give themselves away. Here then is a discerning, entertaining story with many a neatly observed detail that stamps the author's approach as thoughtful, her talent as authentic.

Jockeys of Beauty

(Continued from page 1013)

or a bad story. We are concerned only with those so highly æsthetic, so intensely eclectic, that they wish literature sterilized. It must be just "too-too" or it is nothing. Bunthorne lives again. His fingers hold a scalpel, not a lily. He may anatomize the living, but his admiration is for the rigidity of death. We speak of what we have seen. We have seen writers praised for a fine restraint who developed, as they matured and came into the fullness of their powers, an even finer freedom, a more exuberant vitality. At which point these critics turned away. They are creatures of strict repressions. They blink in full sunlight. They are noctambulists of devious alleys. They follow their chimera through the labyrinths of neurotic brains. Write of a dead soul and they are rejoiced. But for heaven's sake do not affront them with healthy vigor!

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We, even we, are also sensitive. We relish nuance. We appreciate writing of delicacy, of granitic reticence, of clenched intensity. But it is the fire in the flint that we admire, not merely the sharp edge of the flint itself. Moreover, we believe in the power and the glory. And often we find the tradesman preferring "a vaudeville song to a tercet of Dante" a deeper source of inspiration than the ticking dicta of critical coteries. After all, it is not extraordinary to find Gautier in one mood proclaiming life superior to literature. The whole panorama is every creative artist's material, the whole gamut of human emotions. He has not roved "the vast world of the imagination" only to reduce it, in the last instance, to a little black box full of mere intellect, like the minor critic.

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Walter Clare Martin, director of the American Poetry Award, 8 Vanderveer Park Station, Brooklyn, N. Y., recently issued the following announcement for 1928 in behalf of the foundation.

"An award of \$1,000 is offered to stimulate genius in its most incandescent sense, and to help some unknown get his work before the world during his lifetime. \$1,000 will be awarded to the author whose work carries enough beauty and power or originality to make it immortal. \$100 will be awarded for the best script submitted, whether great or commonplace. The manuscript must primarily seek and attain poetic beauty, although it may be written in either prose or verse. It may represent a mood or an idea, or it may even tell a tale. A masterpiece is wanted, not something to sell. The search will continue until December 31st, unless the great unknown is discovered before that time. If no immortal is found by that date, the award of \$100 for the best script will be declared." Three scripts may be sent, together or at intervals. If a work runs more than 1,000 words, only an excerpt should be sent. No scripts returned. Keep duplicates. Authors retain all rights, except that the donor of the prizes reserves the right to quote occasionally from scripts in writing articles about the progress of the search. Do not submit book manuscripts, collections of verse, or descriptions of ideas. Try to understand the purpose of the offer: To unearth the manuscript of a work of poetic beauty—whether written in prose or verse—that suggests the power of genius, by an author not too well known."

The BOWLING GREEN

Off the Deep End, III.

THERE is a bathtub that has a window just over it; through which, in the exhilaration of the morning sluice, when everything seems for a few moments fairly simple, one looks into the green depth and shading of a Long Island glade. Marvelling at those gradations of color, the movement of boughs and leaves, the savory stability of earth underneath, the good hairy grass, the cheerful esperanto of many birds, one is tempted to confess privately that land is much more beautiful than sea. It is a silly thought, for beauty is not a matter for comparisons; but it is safe to say that most praises of marine life, by whomever written, were composed after the observer was safe ashore. The sea writers I love best have always had a very handsome terror of it. Conrad, whose "Mirror" is bible and prayer-book to those who have sea-humility in their souls, tells in one magnificent chapter how he was first initiated into an awareness of its cruelty. There are essays in that book that are in the exact mood and tender humor of Charles Lamb, a parallel that may surprise you. But some of his memories commit him to a very different feeling. "And I looked upon the true sea—the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken. Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its heart. To love it is not well."

So you commit yourself to the deep in a mood of piety. And the humor of the situation is that some of the realest hardships of the sea, so I suspect, are endured not by shellbacks in windjammers, but by yachtsmen who put out in dainty craft scarcely provided against cold and wet. At least the old windjammer had a good pot-bellied stove in the focsle. One's half waking visions, in the neighborhood of Cape Sable, were imaginings of red-hot stoves. For our steward, as I told you, was prostrate, and those who, tempted by thoughts of grub, ventured to the galley to light the gas cooker, took one breath of rich meats and returned to the cockpit to study the sky. The chronicler, usually a lover of kitcheneering sport, went privily to the ice-box, intending to prepare a meal for his companions. He opened the door and studied the Commodore's generous larder. There was a royal exhalation of pork, cheese, bacon, butter, cream, and fish. He came again topside and said nothing of his impulse. But man is always perverse. Even the entire unwillingness to prepare it for himself does not prevent his dreaming of food. Was it that night—the second night out—that I had the curious hallucination of the pork chop? I think it was. Our watch was on duty from 9 until midnight. An afternoon of fog had cleared away towards sunset. The moon, nearly full, was very bright. The great white triangle of *Iris's* mainsail slanted up against the Dipper. We were making about 6 knots, on a course W. by N., there was a pleasant shearing hiss under her bow, the decks glistened silverly. There was the soft glow of the compass, set in the flooring of the cockpit; faint red and green shine where the running lights were set; a crack of cheerful brightness through the forward companion where the Commodore and Y.G. slept a well-earned watch below. P.R. was at the helm, and the chronicler, attempting to persuade himself that all these charming light effects counterbalanced the cold, passed into a small stupor. He was wearing canvas gloves and over these two pairs of large woollen mitts. In his trance he dreamed of a large hot well-browned pork chop. He actually felt it in his hand, tasted its good savor, brought it to his jaws in realization; and woke to find a couple of inches of cold wet wool crammed into his mouth.

Honor to whom honor! It was Y.G. who kept the ship alive with coffee, and (after some 48 hours) broke out two cans of Campbell—one of soup and one of beans. On the third day, Cape Sable having been passed and a bottle of *Ne Plus Ultra* broached, the first health of the voyage was drunk, to the Canner of Camden. The greatest man who ever lived in Camden was not necessarily Walt Whitman. I give you Mr. Campbell of the Soups.

It was 7.30 on the morning of the first of June,

so the notebook tells me, when we made Cape Sable abeam. A tall pharos dimly seen across miles of tumbling gray; as the ads used to say, a small thing to look for, a big thing to find. The log said 212.5 miles and we reckoned the first leg of our cruise well accomplished. But only two hours later we found the mainsail parting from the little brass slides that hold it to the mast. The lashings of twine were evidently not strong enough to carry so big a canvas in a wind. The kind of zipper gear used on the masts of racing craft was quite new to me, and I confess I had my doubts about it. So the mainsail was got down, and the trysail hoisted instead, while the skipper and Charley set about lashing the slides to the eyelets with wire. We then discovered that our patent log had somehow chafed through and gone adrift. Thereafter the Commodore reckoned our speed by throwing an empty matchbox overboard at the bow and timing it to the stern with a stop-watch. Our rate of progress was not much to brag about, for with the trysail we could not get very close to the wind, and there was a heavy bumpy sea.

The starbo'lins had by this time come to consider themselves the lucky watch, probably because the Commodore usually granted them a little extra sleep. At any rate it was they who had what they will probably remember as the greatest single episode of the voyage. The three of them were yarn-ing in the cockpit. With their usual love of ease, they were gratified that the Commodore had decided to keep her under trysail for the night. Making a course NW, she was throwing up fine showers of spray which were tinged pink by the sunset. The P. R. and Captain Barr were gossiping about whales; the chronicler propped at his favorite post in the companion-way where one's legs at least are warm. Suddenly the P. R. cried out with amazement in his voice, "By God, there he is now!" Then his sea manners came to his rescue and he repeated more formally, "Whale ho, on the starboard beam."

I was looking off to windward, meditating that that sunset looked a windy one. I turned just in time. The other two were gaping like lunatics. Right alongside of us, certainly not more than fifty feet away, a huge dark back showed above the water. I could see the pale oily film that seeped off his skin and tinged the water. He looked as big as a submarine. We had to luff up into the wind to avoid hitting him, as he was proceeding gently right across our bow. The great slope of his chine sank quietly, and we waited half expecting to feel the *Iris* lifted beneath us. He must have passed exactly under us, for a minute or so later he came up on the other side and spouted a fountain that shone faintly in the pink twilight. He seemed very much at his ease, loitering easily in that cold dusky water; the sound of his blowing something between a hiss and a sigh. We saw him spout several times, at increasing distances, as he departed with his own proper dignity. It was all too incredible for very sharp observation. Moby Dick himself! We were silent for some time. What abysses of chill, fading from green to immortal black, does he visit in his going? What expression does he wear in his unblemished eye? We had met him in his own honorable realm; sliding, so to speak, on his cellar door. We had heard the very sound of his breathing, and had offended him not nor paid him ought but respect. Who shall say anything new of Moby Dick? Not I.

"I'm glad we didn't hit him," said the P. R. as after long astounded gazing we remembered the compass and resumed our course. "To be kicked to death by a whale would be undignified."

That night there were mares' tails in the sky, long skeins and streamers of cloud brightened by the moon. By 6.30 A. M. sea and wind were rising merrily. There was no talk now of putting on the mainsail. Even on the trysail the lashings of the slides were beginning to go, she was taken down and reefed. There came pouring rain and strong SW gale. The jib also we took down. Now, unless we ran with a bare pole, this was all that could be done. The glass hovered between 29.50 and 29.55.

When you speak to me of the Bay of Fundy, that is the day I shall remember. When one was below, the morale was not too good. This was now the fourth day, and what with one thing and another the cabin had not had a cleaning since we

sailed. The sea had been rough and those not on actual duty had had no ambition for anything but sleep. The patent German ash-tray, come from Bremen, had capsized first of all and spilled matches and tobacco everywhere. Water coming liberally through the skylights had moistened everything to a paste. *Iris*, leaping merrily among hills and valleys, was easing herself to the strain, but her chorus of creaks and groans was anxious to those below. Large consignments of ocean came upon her with the heavy solidity of an automobile smash. How wet were those brown blankets! I admit that the chronicler and Y. G., brooding below and watching cracks widen in the bulkheads and panellings, had a vague notion that she might dissolve about them. I remembered the German glue industry. The Commodore, coming down to examine the chart, was entertained to find his underlings suggesting it would be a good thing to seek shelter somewhere. He was quite right, of course; we were best where we were.

But above, when one's eye grew accustomed to the size of that sea and the way she handled herself, there was real thrill. How big were the waves, people always ask? It cannot be answered because in a heavy sea the hills are too broad to allow the eye any fair scale of measurement. But you see them with a different eye from that of the passenger in a big liner. On a big ship you look down on the water and its color seems darker. From *Iris* we looked closely into these long ridges that loomed above; we could see how coldly green and translucent they were. Every once in so often there was some particularly big comber one could mark from far away: it came striding, breaking in a crest a hundred yards long, with a definite menace written all over it. There was something unpleasantly personal about those waves. "I'll get you if I can," seemed to be their autograph. They would rise, perhaps thirty feet above us, leaving us momentarily in a dull green twilight, far down the hollow. Then with the soar of a rising gull, she would ride up as the great shoulder lifted her. A swirl of cream about her nose as the comber spilled a few buckets along her deck, and we gazed triumphant from the summit along leagues of water laced and wrinkled with foam. For nine or ten hours we were practically hove to, riding switchback on these big ones. Wind sang in our rigging, rafts of fog swathed us in. It was a specially big sea coming through the skylight late in the afternoon that really brought us round the corner. Several gallons of cold water soused on the Commodore's head as he lay asleep. He sat up promptly, looked about at the foul mess in his pretty cabin, and remarked only, "Well, boys, let's clean up." Somewhat gingerly, creeping about in that frolicking hull, we did so. The sea began to moderate. Charley, our able seaman, after a long trick at the helm, could endure starvation no longer. When relieved, he dug out a side of pork from the icebox and began hacking it into chops. The sound and smell of frying began to mitigate our chills. The P. R. had remarked that in these voyages you fill the refrigerator with ice in Halifax, and when you get to New York you find there's more ice than you started with. But after our first real meal in four days we felt different. There were pork chops and onions and potatoes and canned fruit. So was my vision of the pork chop fulfilled. The weather cleared enough to make an attempt at a sunset observation. Emboldened by pork chops we shook out the reef in the trysail and put up the jib. I think it was then that the Commodore was justified in making his favorite remark—"Well, boys, things are looking up."

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

(To be continued)

George Bernard Shaw is quoted in large book advertisements in the English newspapers as saying: "The most remarkable contributions to serious literature of this season are the autobiographies of two famous women—Isadora Duncan and Clare Sheridan. Their almost simultaneous appearance is as striking an event as the discovery of the double star about which astronomers are disputing. Both of them are of great interest as genuine human documents, and very attractive as literature. They are equally free from hypocrisy and indecency. I wish I could say as much for much of the fiction with which library shelves are crammed."