

An old-fashioned 'read'

A DISTINGUISHED critic said on television the other day of a new novel tipped a best-seller that it was curiously old-fashioned—the sort of book that would have been immensely popular in the thirties with the public which patronised the circulating libraries.

A publisher commented hopefully on the same programme that readers seemed to be getting fed up with books about people popping in and out of bed all the time.

I wonder if the House of Gollancz, having started a revolution in publishing 35 years

ago, are now heading the counter-revolution? Two novels on their Spring List seem to take a Great Leap Backward into the salad days when Timothy Whites and Boots provided not only hot water-bottles and Ovaltine but a book to go to bed with.

"THE LAMBERT MILE" by Terence de Vere White (30s.) is genuine Vintage 1930, with cads and clergymen, snobs and bounders: even the blurb admits it is "a chronicle of social snobberies."

Mr. de Vere White has created, or possibly recreated, the world

of the Stockbroker Belt between the wars—a world which may still exist today but is fast disappearing, so fast that all its little drawing-room intrigues will soon be preserved only in such period pieces as this old-fashioned and mildly amusing novel.

More solid and serious is "THE PROFESSOR," by Alan Thomas (35s.): one applies "old-fashioned" to it in a complimentary sense—if only because it has a beginning, a middle and an end. Happily it has much more—clear characterisation, and a certain logic in the characters' actions and reactions.

It concerns among other things, the gap between the generations—and it's a pleasant change not to trip up over the same old generalisations which are stumbling-blocks to one's patience and credibility in so much writing on this particular subject. The middle-aged man of the title finds out within a very short period all sorts of things about his brother and his son; in consequence he discovers—too late—a lot about himself.

Mr. Thomas's starting point is the familiar one of the man who succeeds in his job but fails in his home. He deals with the theme in a way that is both craftsmanlike and compelling.

"ONE FOR THE DEVIL" by Etienne Leroux (W. H. Allen, 25s.) is thousands of miles away from these two books in both setting and style. I found it fascinating and instantly re-readable.

Like its predecessor, "Seven Days at the Silbersteins," it's been translated from the Afrikaans by the poet Charles Eglinton: it returns to the strange dreamlike landscape of Welgevonden, a big farm-estate in South Africa. Mr. Leroux' talents include the ability to make us accept the fantastic whether in speech, action, manner or appearance—there is the same atmosphere of sharp realistic detail combined with colourful improbabilities as one remembers from Alain-Fournier's "Le Grand Meaulnes."

What's it about? On one level, an investigation into a messy murder. Below the surface plot, one soon becomes conscious of a pattern of wider predicaments—guilt, deception, the need for a scapegoat. Mr. Leroux and his translator are producing some fascinating additions to English literature.

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