

NOTES FOR THE NOVEL-READER.

FICTION OF THE WEEK

IT is always with a certain shrinking of the heart that I approach a book of short stories. Am I, for some reason, naturally cold to them? Or is there some peculiar difficulty in the genre? Or is the standard of performance just rather low? At any rate, I almost never feel they are as good as they are cracked up to be. And if the cause of this reaction is obscure, how, in the individual case, is one to pass judgment?

All one can do is to be frank, and to admit the stories may be getting less than fair play. And that would mean that "Colonel Julian," by H. E. Bates (Michael Joseph; 10s. 6d.), is admirable stuff indeed. For once, I found it more impressive than the writer's novels: though on the other hand, the novels strike me as over-praised. Where Mr. Bates excels, where he is really brilliant, is in setting and execution; in human content and direction he is not so good. And these defects, of course, become more harmful in a longer book. Even the short stories have a tendency to get nowhere, and, as it seems to me, a want of heart. But then they can more easily afford it. Over a short course, the scene alone, the sensual impact and the mere *state of things* is nearly adequate as content, and intensely striking. And the execution goes very far.

Except for two excursions in the clowning vein, by no means eminently happy, these are glum stories. Yet they are beautifully set. The "great unwanted empty house" in "The Park," the grand, decaying mansion in "The Flag," the ever-changing seaside in "The Lighthouse" could not be more felt, more exquisitely rendered, more completely nature-breathing. There is another empty mansion in "A Girl Called Peter"—and again lovely; whereas the girl called Peter is a blot. Indeed, the human beings are all eclipsed by their surroundings to such a point that, what with all these derelict, enchanting parks, one may suspect a buried wish to throw them out neck and crop. Yet they are carefully composed into the setting, and intrusive only as a let-down. The blackened stump of the old lighthouse, the extending beach, the flashing beam upon the sands are images of Brand's revulsion from his own wife and of his doomed, frenetic meeting with the girl of the shack. The drifting cuckoo in "The Flag," the derelict and bloated Captain illustrate the same idea; and this is rendered more effectively than usual on the human side because it is a picture only—nothing takes place. Direction and humanity are still the weak points—to which, I feel, more than to any deep creative urge, we should attribute it that nearly everyone is futile and a happy ending unknown. It does seem that the author would regard a happy ending as rather vulgar. "The Little Farm" avoids one by a very dubious trick; yet if it ended well, it would be sentimental. . . . Yet here, again, and everywhere throughout the book, the detail is ablaze with life.

"Joy Street," by Frances Parkinson Keyes (Eyre and Spottiswoode; 12s. 6d.), is at the other pole, and singularly easy to judge. It is a very, very long book, yet in no way formidable; and it will attract all those who like their novels to be long, and yet not formidable—which implies a vast public, though one composed, I think, exclusively of women. Here they are in great luck; they have a chunk of reading admirable in its kind, and out and out a "nice story."

The scene is Boston, where the good old families live in their fine old houses and preserve the fine, exclusive old ways. Indeed, their tone is so old-fashioned that the date—the 1930's—comes as a shock. Emily Thayer is a child of this élite. And so is Roger Field by birth and training, only he is hard up, and what is worse, unlikely to correct the error. Emily's parents, therefore, are against the match; old Mrs. Forbes, her matriarchal grandmamma, while not opposing it, regrets it. Roger, she says, will never set the world on fire, and Emily is not in love. But Emily declares she doesn't want him to, and does love him.

He gets employment in a legal firm which has defied tradition by enrolling "outsiders"—a Jew, an Irishman and an Italian. After these upstart three, it adds the unexceptionable, plodding Roger as a kind of sop. And Emily envisages their house in Joy Street as a birthplace of social harmony. Of course, they live at the right end, on the elect side of Beacon Hill; the other end of Joy Street is a haunt of aliens, like Roger's colleague Pellegrino. Neither her scheme of concord nor her marriage turns out a wild success—not that she ever ceases to be fond of Roger, a pathetically blameless young man, rather slow-witted and low-spirited, but good as gold. Still, Grandmamma was right, she didn't love him. During the war, and after, she has much to bear—much abnegation, sacrifice and grief; but she emerges as a wiser and stronger soul. One can't quite grasp, in retrospect, what made it such a long story; certainly no profusion of event. But it is quietly entertaining all through, and shows a very pleasing generosity to the less worthy figures.

"The Spoils of Time," by Philip Gibbs (Hutchinson; 10s. 6d.), covers a longer period in a much shorter space. The lifetime of the hero is the author's own, and he, too, is an author, by the name of Val Haviland. Val lives in Church Street, Kensington, where we first meet him as a small boy. The great event at this stage is the elopement of his gay, affectionate, erratic mother with a young portrait-painter. She has the provocation of an "absentee husband," a journalist whose days and nights are given to *The Times*; and Val indignantly assumes his father must have ill-treated her. Then comes the ghastliness of the First War: post-war hysteria and disillusionment: first steps in authorship, and a romantic, happy marriage with the daughter of a great house: and then the second cataclysm and its aftermath. Of course, it does sound rather too familiar. But it is always likeable.

"Lady Killer," by Anthony Gilbert (Collins; 8s. 6d.), means literally what it says, and introduces us to a "professional husband." There is no mystery at all. The dark, insinuating Henry is in plain sight, and we observe him dealing smoothly with a few odd wives before he lights on Sarah Templeton. This dupe, for once, is an attractive girl, and even Henry feels attracted, to his own surprise. And while his method with the others has been brisk and simple, Sarah gets the full orchestra; she is entrapped in Goblin Cottage in the haunted wood, though luckily with Arthur Crook on the trail. The theme is right up Mr. Gilbert's street.—K. JOHN.

BOOKS OF THE DAY.

BLUE BLOOD AND LONG LINEAGE.

"THE British aristocracy has become the most democratic in the world," says Mr. C. F. J. Hankinson, editor of *Debrett*, the 1951 edition of which (Odhams Press; 46 6s.) has just appeared. I see what he means by the apparent contradiction in terms. *Debrett* is no longer the chronicle of ancient lineage and blue blood. The "son of a belted earl" nowadays has a hard struggle to keep pace not merely with "cook's son," but with the scion of the National Coal Board and the British Electricity Authority. Indeed, as Mr. Hankinson points out, the new honours bestowed and coming within the scope of *Debrett* in 1950 alone, number 657, of which sixteen were new peerages and 172 were knighthoods. Indeed, to judge from his researches, it would appear that we are gradually approaching the Gilbertian situation so admirably outlined in "The Gondoliers," when it will be more distinguished to be unhonoured than *vice versa*. Thus, although 337 peerages and 440 baronetcies have become extinct since the turn of the century, this distinguished "wastage" has been more than made good as there have been 546 new peers and 813 baronets. It is not surprising that Mr. Hankinson in last year's edition drew attention to the growing cult of heraldry. This is perhaps a natural form of escapism from the unromantic realities of the present. It must also be good business for the College of Heralds. Looking through the pages of this handsome volume, I reflected with the late Mr. Humbert Wolfe:

... Glory to the new made Peer
Hark the Herald's College sings
As they fake his quarterings.

One not uninteresting point raised by Mr. Hankinson is that the present Lord Mayor, Sir Denys Lowson, was, until he received his baronetcy last month, the first untitled Lord Mayor for thirty years. However, in this he was in good company, for Mr. Hankinson points out that Dick Whittington, although always known as Sir Richard Whittington, was probably never knighted, and the customary baronetcy (received by all Lord Mayors on retirement, with only one exception) was not, of course, in existence until 1611. In point of fact, the democratisation of what one might loosely call the titled classes has been one of the secrets of the comparative stability of this country. The Continental aristocracies, certainly before the days when it became both fashionable and financially essential for the head of nearly every ancient old Roman family to ally himself to Pittsburgh or Detroit, were so narrowly exclusive that the blue blood in their veins tended to give them a permanent anaemia. The constant refreshment of the British titled classes with blood from counting-house or industrial factory, and latterly from T.U.C. and A.E.U., cannot but be healthy. Nevertheless, the fact remains that by Continental and other standards the British aristocracy remains a parvenu one. That is to say, I believe that there are not more than nine titles held in this country which were held by the same families in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

The Wars of the Roses, of course, had a lot to do with it, and so did fierce persecution of the survivors of the old aristocracy under the Tudors. I have been reading, for example, "Stonor," by Robert Julian Stonor, O.S.B. (Johns; 21s.). Of the grandfathers, father, uncles and first cousins of Lady Anne Neville, the daughter of the Marquis of Montagu, who married Sir William Stonor at the end of the fifteenth century, six were killed in battle, four executed and four murdered!

This is a most remarkable and heartening book. Remarkable for the fact that for 800 years, without a break, the same family has lived at Stonor Park, in a fold of the Chilterns, and heartening because of the fact that through the most appalling vicissitudes and persecutions, the family has maintained their standards, traditions and beliefs.

While I am not sure that I am convinced by Dom Stonor's theory that Stonor remained a Christian Romano-British-Celtic enclave, from the fifth century and the collapse of the Roman Empire, through the Dark Ages to the re-establishment of Christianity in England, there is no doubt that there has been a Stonor at Stonor Park since the twelfth century. Until the Reformation the Stonors were people of great consequence in the Chiltern area and, after it, remained staunchly and unwaveringly loyal to the religion of their ancestors. Throughout the appalling persecution of Tudor, Stuart and Commonwealth times, they never hesitated, paying the huge fines for recusancy as best they might, and contributing their martyrs to the cause in which they believed. Some went abroad, like the Irish and Scottish Jacobites, and like them, too, contributed a full quota of distinguished soldiers to the armies of France, Prussia, Austria, Russia and Spain. But in spite of fines, and in spite of persecution, there was always a Catholic Stonor at Stonor Park. The story as

outlined by Dom Stonor has every ingredient—secret printing presses, hidden stairways, the Mass said in an upper attic by Father Campion, who was captured a few days after his last visit to Stonor, and was done to a terrible death. There is humour, there is romance, and above all, moreover, there is the story of noble and enduring constancy through the centuries which must wring admiration from friend and foe alike.

Stonor is not far from Oxford, and at various times the connection with the city and university was close. A further contribution to the literature of Oxford is "The Story of Oxford," by S. P. B. Mais (Staples; 9s. 6d.). Mr. Mais is an Oxonian, and I am indebted to him for the anonymous quotation: "The Oxford man looks as if the world belongs to him, the Cambridge man as if he did not care to whom it belonged." This book, as you might expect from the author, is readable, workmanlike and entertaining, and adequately garnished with photographs. It should just about catch the last of the Festival market.

Another book of the quality of which one is assured is "Ghosts and Greasepaint," by W. MacQueen-Pope (Hale; 21s.). Mr. MacQueen-Pope's books about the theatre of the past fifty years are uniformly entertaining, and this delightful further specimen is no exception to the rule.

An annual event of importance is "The Britannica Book of the Year" (£3). This yearly addition to the volumes of the "Encyclopædia Britannica" is essential to those who possess that admirable work of reference, and should make those who do not, wonder why they don't.

E. D. O'BRIEN.

CHESS NOTES.

By BARUCH H. WOOD, M.Sc.

AS soon as they chose Venice, with its magical charm, as the venue of this year's Congress of the International Chess Federation, I believe the success of the gathering was assured. It has been said—as of so many congresses in other fields!—that the delegates have too good a time. But how many a big commercial or diplomatic success has been founded on the knack of throwing a splendid party at the right moment . . . and was it pure coincidence that, the day after the Italian Chess Federation had taken us all on a wonderful excursion to the lagoon and the Lido, there was more harmony, genial give-and-take and constructive agreement than all the rest of the week?

Many questions are settled unanimously, of course, but give-and-take is certainly needed at other times. We too often seem to be a U.N.O. in miniature, Soviet Russia, Hungary, Poland, Eastern Germany, Rumania, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia forming a solid bloc on one side and, opposing these, Great Britain, Scotland, France, Western Germany, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Holland and Belgium.

There were two delegations from outside Europe, one representing Australia and New Zealand, the other Egypt.

This last was the most interesting of all, in many ways. From Egypt virtually no chess news of any kind has come for centuries, though for a while, early in the Islamic advance through North Africa, Egypt's players were the best in the world. Now there suddenly appeared Mr. Saad Zaghloul Bassiouni, who told us he was Egyptian champion, having won a national tournament in 1949 (of which none of us had heard!) and then proceeded to beat his five closest followers in that event, in private matches. More—in casual games, against several players of master class at Venice, he demonstrated no mean skill, winning practically all of them. He may hit the headlines when he plays in the World Championship qualifying tournament at Marienbad this month, though modern technique has developed so intensively that it seems almost impossible for a complete newcomer to triumph in his first clash with masters, without preliminary toughening-up.

Whatever he does in his first tournament, Mr. Bassiouni certainly added a picturesque touch to his first chess conference. He introduced us to Dr. Yusuf Rashad Bey, King Farouk's personal physician, who also is in the top rank of amateur players, and pleased me by disclosing that he had taken my chess magazine regularly for the last fourteen years. King Farouk himself, who is still honeymooning on the Lido as I write, enjoys an occasional game. Maybe, under his patronage, Egyptian players will soon be taking a place among the world's leading masters.

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