NOTES FOR THE NOVEL-READER.

FICTION OF THE WEEK.

ALL this week's grimness and austerity are concentrated in a single book, having disposed of which we find ourselves exceptionally carefree. And indeed almost shocked—as though our muscles had been tensed to lift a weight which is not there.

The "heavy" work is **"The Closed Harbour,"** by James Hanley (Macdonald; 12s. 6d.). One might describe this as a novel of the sea, and Marius, its hero, as a merchant captain—yet only by a cruel paradox. For in effect the seas are dry, and Captain Marius is dead and done with. But he is still refusing to lie down. The days "crawl over him like bugs," and he too crawls, with horrible persistence, in his filthy uniform, through the infernal glare and tumult of Marseilles. . . . Yet his abasement is chock-full of pride. Only a captain's berth will do; he has no ticket now, but he has still his "merits." Day after day, he cringes for an interview with M. Follet of the Heros Company, who used to know his father; M. Follet is his grand hope. And weeks go by, and he can never reach him. From M. Follet's angle, what would be the point? Even if there were jobs to spare, this suppliant is not a captain, but the "Nantes bum," a long-reputed Jonah, and perhaps a murderer. His ship went down in 1940, in the thick of chaos, so he escaped inquiry. But if the tales are true, he was in luck.

So his own mother thinks—that huge, implacable old woman, with her ferocious pride. Her husband was a naval officer, killed in the First War; and he despised his son, got him debarred the Service, and declared his real place was the gutter. Eugéne has proved it, too: never a decent ship, always the dirty little tramps, the shady owners. . . . And at last, disgrace. When he came back that night, safe, sound, and horribly without his nephew, for Madame Marius it was the end. She sold up everything at Nantes, which to herself and Madeleine, her widowed daughter, is the seat of life. They followed Eugéne to Marseilles, and share his gutter-refuge; but they never speak to him. So the old woman has decreed. She hopes to break him down, and hear him "vomit" a confession. Only he doesn't know it; to him this fell tenacity is mother-love, and in a ghastly way he may be right. Meanwhile, those stony faces keep him in the streets, where one last terror is laid up. Go where he will, a dwarfish clerk from Heros seems to be pursuing him. . . . Eugéne is now half-crazed, but he is not mistaken. The dwarf is chasing him indeed; and from that dedicated rescuer, that hound of heaven, he flees into another world.

One may object that Captain Marius is a sealed book; we are acquainted only with his nightmare. But its power is extraordinary. So is the grim, pathetic shape of the old woman. This author has been called a realist, meaning, perhaps, that he has no romantic let-offs. Everything works out to the bitter end—but on a plane quite different from the "photographic."

In **"The Brazen Bull,"** by Gerald Kersh (Heinemann; 10s. 6d.), all forms of realism are excluded. The book has half-a-dozen stories, and they aim to please; *how* they shall please, whether by farce, or sentiment, or swagger, is of less account.

The title-story is a farcical adventure in the picaresque. Poor Mr. Kis, the most inept and gullible of men, began life on the Nixburg *Kurjer*. As a reporter, he was doing all right. But then his paper took a fancy for "exclusive interviews" with well-known characters on the express. Day after day poor Kis ran up and down the platform looking for celebrities. And while he genuinely blundered, it was still all right. Then came a fatal hour: celebrities ran out, the sack was looming, so he encountered one "in his mind's eye." And such a safe one, too: the dark, unknown, unphotographed, stupendous author of the world's leading tosh. Why, Bull Penhaligon might *be* on the express! . . .

And so he was. Next day, he came back to confirm the interview. He was the very man. Of course, we guess what is to happen, only not in full; always, the author is a trifle cleverer. This was the story I liked best.

The longest, "Jack of Swords," is Dumasesque in theme; it is about a *coup d'état* against Napoleon during his campaign in Russia. Again the ingenuity is great. Ex-Major Ratapoil is all resource, and nonchalant, heroic swagger. Also, he makes a gallant marriage of convenience with his landlady's niece. And then there are four tales of Mr. Ypsilanti—that dear old blade, that relic of Imperial Vienna, so kindly, chivalrous, unruffled in the teeth of want. Here sentiment abounds, and ingenuity, though present, takes a back seat.

"The Third Pip," by Rupert Lang (Constable; 10s. 6d.), suffers from a deficiency of plot. It has a kind of theme; it is about a sad young man who reaches Victory in Europe as a mere lieutenant, but needs to be a captain when demobbed. If not, he loses his inheritance. Therefore, of course, in theory he should be up and doing—but what, in practice, can he do? It would be hard to say, and Roger, anyhow, is not the type: or he would have his pip, and not have stranded woefully on a mixed gun-site. But now belated chance comes to his aid. He is washed off, and wafted to the scene of conquest; he drifts from job to job, each one more futile than the last, and less promotable—and with the last and silliest, he has arrived. It is too passive and unstitched; but it has a pleasing tone, and some of it is very funny.

"No Bail for the Judge," by Henry Cecil (Chapman and Hall; 12s. 6d.), though lightweight as becomes a thriller, is an event of mark. It is an irony of chance that Mr. Justice Prout should start by raising eyebrows at a witness upon moral grounds. Confessedly, he spent a night with the wrong woman; can one believe his word? The judge has certainly a prudish streak. Yet he is about to spend not one, but five, nights with a *fille de joie*. Then he is found upon her corpse, in seemingly conclusive circumstances, which he can't explain. Broadmoor would probably have been the end, but for his daughter's meeting with the highly questionable Mr. Low, whose worse than questionable methods get the right man. Almost all through we are in bad, but entertaining company; the author knows a lot of law, and he is all wit, liveliness and common sense.

K. JOHN.

CHESS NOTES.

By BARUCH H. WOOD, M.Sc.

THAT chess was Russia's national game, travellers observed and reported centuries ago. Under the Soviets, chess has been fostered in a crescendo. From time to time, we read of world-renowned masters scoring, in simultaneous play against Moscow schoolboys, barely five or six wins among twenty or thirty games; but I don't think the average Englishman has the faintest idea how intensive chess instruction in Russia really is. I doubt whether we *could* take chess so seriously. Britons never, never shall be Slavs!

The official Russian chess magazine recently outlined a syllabus of study for second and third category players. Please don't get the impression that "second category" indicates something a shade below the masters. The masters form a clearly defined class with strict qualifications of entry. Such players as Botvinnik, Boleslavsky, Keres, Flohr, Smyslov are not masters, but Grand Masters; a recognised master might strive for a lifetime to qualify as a Grand Master in vain. Below the masters are "Candidate Masters"; below the Candidates are the first category players, and below these are the second and third category players for whom these lessons are designed.

Thus "second and third category" players are just a bit above the ruck. They have just started to be somebody. If there are 10,000,000 organised chess-players in the U.S.S.R., probably 5,000,000 are in these two classes. Scholastically, we might say they have just about taken their school certificate. In Army terms, they have just shed their corporal's stripes for a sergeant's.

What sort of instruction do these people get?

The first two lessons are characteristically devoted to chess history, the pre-eminence of Soviet chess and the debt to Russia's present leaders. The third tackles balance of material, games with Q against 2 Kts and B; Q against 2 Rs; Q and P *v.* R, Kt and B; and so on. The fourth continues with R against B and 2 Ps; 2 Rs against 2 Kts and B; and so on.

With lesson five we start to tackle the standard openings, and we plod on through the whole range of them for months to come. Meanwhile we have contrasted the classic treatment of the centre (occupation by pawns), with the hyper-modern (control by pieces from a distance); we have been shown the importance of *time* (to move your bishop from K3 to B4 and back again is normally to waste two complete turns to move—enough to lose the game) and, half-way through the eleventh lesson, have switched to end-games.

Lesson fifteen brings us to the "Tactical solution of strategic problems" (combinative play, to you and me). For weeks we examine every conceivable type of central pawn position: typical is lesson 24, entirely devoted to consideration of openings which produce an isolated pawn on White's Q4.

"Attack on the king" is attacked with similar earnestness in lessons 30 to 32: the attacked king can be castled or not; or it can be castled on the same side of the board as the attacker's king or on the opposite side; each situation calls for its own appropriate methods.

We have British masters to whom a lot of this would be elementary; who have gone in for psychological play, done opening research, studied play against square-complexes of one colour and so on—things above the head of the classes for whom all this was planned. Where the Russians gain, is in exhaustiveness. Whereas few British Championship players have a repertoire of more than four or five main openings, Russians whole classes below are apparently expected to know twenty!

BOOKS OF THE DAY.

THE ESSENTIAL ENGLAND.

THIS week brings a batch of widely contrasting, but interesting books. It does not need the recommendations of such extremely different people as Mr. Tom Driberg, M.P., Miss Gracie Fields and Ronald Searle, the creator of those horrible schoolgirls, to make **"Lease of Life,"** by Andrew Milbourne (Museum Press; 12s. 6d.), a book which is both memorable and humbling. Andrew Milbourne was a regular soldier, having joined the Army as a boy in his early teens. He transferred to the Paratroops of the First Airborne Division, which covered itself with glory at Arnhem. The descriptions of the confused, deadly and heroic fighting in Oosterbeek is as vivid as anything in war literature. But the book is not primarily concerned with Andy Milbourne's gallantry as a soldier. For at Arnhem there happened something which changed the whole of his life. He suffered wounds which led to the amputation of both hands and the removal of one eye. The primary interest of the book is the astounding rehabilitation of the maimed soldier, till he actually reached a point where he was working as a miner underground. (His description of the feeling of helplessness of a man without tactile sense who has knocked over his miner's lamp in the dark underground and unable to find it, creates for the reader who is whole the strange apart world of the maimed with its special terrors, large or small, as nothing else can.) The description of his fear at meeting his mother and his fiancée, indeed, of encountering normal life again, after his repatriation from the P.O.W. camp after the war, is very moving—though it is not meant to be. The description of how he learned to master the mechanical contrivances which now serve him for his missing limbs, the heartbreaks and setbacks, the moments of despair, the frank discussion of the moment when his marriage nearly broke up, gains everything from the simplicity of the telling. That Andy Milbourne is now happily settled as a Civil Servant with a wife and son he adores represents a triumph for the resilience and courage of the human spirit. No one who reads this book will fail, I feel sure, to be both disturbed and moved by it.

Mr. Milbourne, a "Geordie," is very much a part of the essential England. In the strange amalgam of races which make up the English, a countryman of Kent is, I suppose, as far removed in environment and outlook from the industrial Tynesider as could be imagined. Yet take them abroad, whether in uniform or on a Cook's tour, and no foreigner could recognise them for anything but English. Mr. H. E. Bates, except when he writes about Spain (when he contrives to produce some dated nonsense), is one of my favourite authors. I would forgive him anything, for example, for such a book as **"The Country of White Clover"** (Michael Joseph; 12s. 6d.). This is an autobiographical description, in the manner of his earlier books on the countryside, of how he came to live in Kent some twenty years ago and all the trials and tribulations of the new arrival setting out to pull together thirty-seven derelict acres, at the hands of the natives, who are, as anyone who knows that part of the world can tell you, about twice as shrewd as the slickest spiv that ever trundled his barrow through the West End streets. In the middle of the war, Sir Reeder Bullard, our Ambassador in Teheran, brought to my sick-room in his hospitable Embassy a pile of books which included one called "The Cricket Match." I have forgotten who wrote it (and if any reader can tell me I shall be grateful for the information), but I have always placed it, with that work of the late Archie Macdonnell, "England, Their England," in the forefront of delightful, humorous, penetrating descriptions of the English countryside. Mr. Bates' latest book must now complete a trio in my appreciation. The impossible tyrant Mr. Pimpkins, the insidious but unsatisfactory post-war product Mr. Doolittle are—I was going to say "creations," but that won't do, as they are drawn from life—characters whose description will long live in my memory. Incidentally, Mr. Bates has some sound things to say about an England which has so neglected the essentials of life for the misleading delights of the Welfare State that it might one day sit starving beside a television set, having nothing on which its State-provided false teeth could chew.

It is a far cry from Kent and the Garden of England to the inhospitable shores of Alaska. Mrs. Ballard Hadman, the authoress of **"As the Sailor Loves the Sea"** (Heinemann; 15s.), has a gift for descriptive writing, however, of which Mr. Bates himself would not be ashamed. Mrs. Hadman, an artist, came to Alaska on a temporary sketching and painting trip. The stay lengthened out into twelve years, during which time she became an expert fisherwoman, trolling for the great king salmon off those inhospitable coasts and in those dangerous seas, and where she married and has two children. The book is written in a simple enough manner, but the material is attractively exciting. I do not think that Mrs. Hadman is likely to lure me to sign on as a fisherman in Alaska, but I certainly enjoy reading her descriptions of it. It gives me a cosy feeling of comfort and safety to contemplate the hazards and discomforts which she and her husband, and her remarkable, highly individualistic fisherman friends must now be undergoing.

Some time ago I reviewed a book on Alaska by Harmon and Connie Helmericks. This remarkable pair have now produced yet another description of Alaska entitled **"Our Summer with the Eskimos"** (Museum Press; 18s.). It deals largely with the vast game preserve of the interior and with the 250 Eskimos who are the inhabitants of its 60,000 square miles. While Mrs. Hadman deals with the seas and the coast of Alaska, this is essentially a story of the interior—and first class it is.

A little while ago, too, I reviewed Colonel Henry Legge-Bourke's book on the Household Troops. This admirable volume, with its colour photographs, as good as any I have ever seen, has now been divided into two, **"The Brigade of Guards on Ceremonial Occasions"** and **"The Household Cavalry on Ceremonial Occasions"** (both produced by Macdonald at 10s. 6d.). They have one advantage over the consolidated volume, and that is, they are brought entirely up to date, so that what, for me, has been through my sentient life "His Majesty's Brigade of Guards" becomes "Her Majesty's Brigade of Guards" (as they now are) throughout.

E. D. O'BRIEN.