

# WELCOME SHORT STORIES

By WALTER MARSDEN

JUST as there is supposed to be no bad beer, only some beer that is better than other beer, so all the tales in these eight books of short stories are readable.

Two of the books belong to what, since Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, is termed science fiction, a genre which has a respectable ancestry reaching back at least to the second century A.D. when Lucian, a Syrian from the Euphrates, recounted in admirable Greek some still unsurpassed fantasies of space travel. *The Best Science Fiction Stories*, edited by E. F. Bleiler and T. E. Dikty (Grayson and Grayson, 8s. 6d.), includes tales on such themes as super-rocket warfare; a murderer trying to deceive apparatus which reveals his actions but not his motives; the problems of a statesman whose life can be indefinitely prolonged if the electors so wish; and an amusing fantasy about a tough truck-driver jolted into a time-track parallel to his own. A good deal of intelligible thought has gone to the making of each story, and the authors are competent professionals out to hold our attention by craftsmanship as well as bizarre content.

A companion book (same publishers, same price), *Men Against the Stars*, edited by Martin Greenberg and introduced by Willy Ley, whose *The Conquest of Space* recently appeared, deals with problems of colonizing the

planets. First there are the perils of space travel; then the dangers of unknown powers on, say, Mars, hostile to our kind of life; then the difficulties of organizing and maintaining the colonies. The machinery includes a murderous gas; a race of beings on Venus so conservative that they object to any alteration at all to their economy; and a fable about intrigue among the rulers of interplanetary systems. These two last tales have an agreeable allegorical and satirical application which sets them apart from the melodrama of the other stories. In contrast to the writers in the other book, most of these authors rely for effect on the wildly-unfamiliar background (sometimes unintentionally comic) or on stereotyped characters and situations.

ANYBODY who enjoyed the Kai Lung books will probably pounce on *Magic Casements*, by Langston Day (Rider, 12s. 6d.), which comes highly recommended by Clifford Bax and Algonon Blackwood. These are tales of wonder, akin to fairy-stories, ranging from ancient China and Babylon to Victorian Bayswater. One of them, set in medieval England, concerns a young miller's love for a water-sprite; another is an old Cairo Night's entertainment; a third is set in Toltec Mexico. The delicacy

of the telling is remarkably preserved in the apt and striking illustrations by Audrey Ogden, an artist still in her teens. She has translated enchantingly the exotic mystery and, equally, the robust comedy of certain stories such as that of the Roman buffoon who became Emperor, and of the Augsburg alchemist who brought a statue farcically to life. The vivid local colour of these stories, and their poetical content, haunt the daytime mind with the urgency of dreams.

The next volume, *And Delilah*, by Neil Paterson (Hodder and Stoughton, 10s. 6d.), is dedicated to Somerset Maugham, who said of the author's first book, *The China Run*, "Admirably told and wonderfully amusing. I only wish it had been longer." Critics vied in acclaiming Mr. Paterson's recent novel, and I anticipate another pean of praise for this collection of stories. The career and heartbreak of a circus-midget is the central theme of one story, the final humanity of a formidably righteous grandfather in the Canadian backwoods that of another, while the author uses a Spanish setting for powerful tales of the bullring and of a richly comic old pigeon-fancier.

My favourite was the ironical comedy of a prizefighter, cut off from most human contacts by his Neanderthal moroseness, exposed to incomprehension by his passion for astonishing animal pets, and befriended by the young narrator, who loses many illusions about the goodness and the badness of people. Mr. Paterson has the gift of narrative, a warm sympathy for all sorts and conditions of men (and women), and a variety of mood. He is certain of a host of happy readers who will recommend this book.

MANY readers will have been on the look-out for a new volume of short stories by H. E. Bates, who had not published a collection of tales since the well-known favourites which appeared under the pseudonym "Flying Officer X." Now they will be satisfied by the publication of *Colonel Julian* (Michael Joseph, 10s. 6d.). As those familiar with his post-war novels may expect, some of the stories have an Eastern setting, but for the most part the scene is the English countryside he describes so sensitively. There are two comic stories about the legendary Uncle Silas which will provoke all but the farthest-gone misanthrope to laugh out loud. One or two others are as near to the sketch or anecdote as Mr. Bates ever permits himself to go, but at his best, as in "The Little Farm" or the title piece, these interpretations of lonely, inarticulate people light up the pathos of the human predicament with a tenderness and comprehension that linger after the pages are turned.

For myself, I would particularly like to recommend *The Injustice Collectors*, by Louis Auchincloss (Gollancz, 10s. 6d.). The American author explains

that his title refers to "people who looking for injustice, even in a free world, because they suffer from a need to feel that this world has wronged them." I must stress that the stories are not case-histories in a psychiatrist's notebook; the style is urbane and fluent, the manner civilized, the irony is shot through with humour, and wit illuminates the underlying sadness.

WITH some of the tales I have far mentioned there are comicities which start reverberations in the reader's mind, for the characters that life to live before and after the story, their situations as revealed or implied have a power of extending the reader's sensitivity. The style has something to do with it, but even more it is a matter of the quality of the writer's imagination.

There are examples of such stories in two very good collections, which deserve extended appreciation. *The Gunston* has edited with real skill and understanding *Best Nature Stories* (Faber and Faber, 12s. 6d.), contains some extraordinary tales about insects, some exciting yarns of big game, several bird stories of merit. Many famous authors are among the contributors, and there are also written the way to becoming well known. Twenty-one stories from *Companions* selected by Denys Val Baker, make *One and All* (Museum Press, 9s. 6d.) in which work by "Q." and S. B. Bar Gould, for example, is set beside the work of Frances Bellerby, Frank B. and Ruth Manning-Sanders, all whom are represented by outstanding tales.

## Chaplin in Peter Pan

"Charlie Chaplin was present on historic occasions. On January 1900, the London Hippodrome, which had previously been a circus, opened as a theatre, and the eleven-year-old Chaplin took a small part in a sketch called *Giddy Ostend*. Four years later he was one of the wolves in the first performance of *Peter Pan* at the Duke of York's on December 1904.

Between these events, he had played the boy Billy in *Sherlock Holmes* and toured the provinces with *A Roman Cockayne* and then returned to London to resume the part of Billy in a new production of *Sherlock Holmes*. There is a well-known anecdote in connection with the named play. Chaplin was eleven when he first played Billy. When he handed him the script of his part, he dared not confess to the manager that he could neither read nor write for fear of losing his chance. He hid the part home with him, and said night with his mother, who said to him word by word." From *Little Fellow*, by Peter Cotes and Niklaus (Elek, 15s.).

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