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NEW NOVELS by Richard Church

NEVER before has the conflict between the common, decent neighbourliness of man and his horrible capacity for doctrinism been so sharply set as it is to-day. Which will win? We believe we know. We also know how dangerous will be the victory when it comes. How shall we teach freedom to those who despise it? Shall we have to force it upon them? Where, then, will be that freedom?

These are questions that beset and frighten us to-day, for they raise again insoluble problems, amongst them the old one of whether the end justifies the means. Totalitarians, and all fanatical theorists, believe that it does. We have to teach them that these ends are but horizons, ever receding as we approach them; mere perspective lines against which we set the pattern of our lives—our immediate conduct, our means.

These remarks are appropriate to my reading of another novel which reveals with acute intensity the outlook of these people who are making the world so uncomfortable and devilish to-day. **Darkness at Noon**, by Arthur Koestler, translated by Daphne Hardy (Cape, 8s.), is a fictional presentation of the processes utilized at totalitarian trials. I find it painful, and foreign reading. It gives me a sense of nightmare. It makes me wonder whether the twentieth century is not a turning point on the road to the annihilation of the human spirit and the civilization which is that spirit's physical manifestation.

I don't believe it is, of course, any more than I believe that a man with an infectious fever will remain with a high temperature for the rest of his life. A reviewer's job is not primarily to air his beliefs, but sometimes his depths are stirred by a book. Mine have been by this book, because it presents so skilfully a condition of society which is so terrifying. In reaction from that condition I say that ends are always indeterminate, and that therefore we must attach our humanity to means. Perhaps it is only another way of saying: "Look after the pennies, and the pounds will look after themselves."

Darkness at Noon is an intimate study of the mind of one Rubashov, a high official in a totalitarian government, from the moment of his arrest until the moment when the bullet enters the back of his neck. He is an adept at arrests. He has been arrested some years earlier, and tortured also, before the "confession" which reinstated him in the good graces of the Party, and the Leader who is known only as No. 1. He is taken to a modern prison, which, in spite of its steel and concrete and glaring electric lights, is not over-clean. It has a stale smell, compounded of several things: the rank sweat of human bodies whose glands are stimulated by fear; the feral smell of the torture chamber; the odour of the yard where the twisted, dehumanized wretches are finally despatched.

The reasons for such treatment are always obvious and logical. Take that of a man called Bogrov, whom Rubashov sees—through the spy-hole in the door of his cell—dragged along the corridor between two warders. The "figure hung slack and yet with doll-like stiffness from their grasp, stretched out at length, face turned to the ground, belly arched downwards. The legs trailed after, the shoes skated along on the toes, producing the squealing sound which Rubashov had heard from the distance. Whittish strands of hair hung over the face turned towards the tiles, with the mouth wide open. Drops of sweat clung to it; out of the mouth spittle ran thinly down the chin. . . ." And so it goes on, too vile to quote further.

And what is it for? Because this man, as the examining magistrate explains to Rubashov in the interview following this staging of the procession past Rubashov's cell, "advocated the construction of submarines of large tonnage and a long range of action. The Party is in favour of small submarines with a short range. Bogrov had a strong following in the Admiralty and

amongst the officers of the old guard. It would not have been enough to put him out of the way; he also had to be discredited. A trial was projected to unmask the partisans of big tonnage as saboteurs and traitors. We had already brought several little engineers to the point of being willing to confess publicly to whatever we liked. But Bogrov wouldn't play the game. In a public trial he would only have created confusion amongst the people. There was no other way possible than to liquidate him administratively. Would not you have done the same thing in our position?"

Rubashov would. He lived in a New Order, and no sentiment could be allowed in that order. He had already allowed women secretaries to be done to death in the Party's attempts to trap him. Now he was trapped, and he decided to make a full "confession" after six days of third-degree examination.



Mr. Arthur Koestler.



Mr. Richard Hughes (see next page).

Because of this he had a public trial; but, all the same, he was "liquidated administratively."

That is the kind of horror against which the British and American and Greek peoples are at present fighting.

With a shudder one turns from this to two books of escape. The first one, **The Ghost Knows His Greengages**, by H. B. Saxe (Constable, 7s. 6d.), is a rough enough alternative. It is a sort of parody of the American gangster stuff, with a mixture of older Ruritanian romanticism. The Ghost is a picturesque figure, who—as the author more than hints—is the heir to a mid-European Grand-duchy. But, having married a lovely lady who has deserted him for an American millionaire, he has turned berserk. After fighting as an airman in Spain, he comes to England with his Caliban, the tough narrator of the tale, a simple hero whose brains are in his fists. This Sammy worships The Ghost, and as we see after the story has generated sound and fury, manages to catch a reflection of his god's genius and to use it while that god is put out of action for some weeks by a bullet in the scalp. The bullet comes from a silent revolver in the hand of a

To choose from . . .

"Fool of Time," by Beatrice Kean Seymour (Heinemann, 9s.).

"The Beauty of the Dead," by H. E. Bates (Cape, 7s. 6d.).

"Criminal C.O.D.," by Phoebe Atwood Taylor (Collins, 7s. 6d.).

"London Front," by F. Tennison Jesse and H. M. Harwood (Constable, 12s.).

"Tim Harington Looks Back," by Sir Charles Harington (Murray, 12s. 6d.).

"Winston Churchill," by Robert Sencourt (Faber, 8s. 6d.).

JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY

January 3, 1941

Page 367

fabulously rich racketeer who runs bucket shops and promotes companies galore. He has already collected three and a half million from simple English rentier types. Moreover he has put away a lovely female by drowning her in the dungeons of his country castle. He threatens another girl too, to whom Sammy is almost as devoted as he is to The Ghost. For Sammy is really a man's man; or perhaps a gorilla's gorilla.

Rough justice is delayed until the last page, by which time the reader will have become a perfect film-fan of *The Ghost*, this international Robin Hood with the deadly punch in the night clubs of Soho, and the deadlier aim with a revolver whenever he is put into a tight corner. Aeroplanes, high-speed cars, lovely and mysterious women float like day-dreams through the tale, as it flows on its Damon Runyon-like way along a stream of prose in the present tense and American slang.

Alf's New Button, by W. A. Darlington

(Herbert Jenkins, 7s. 6d.), is quite old-fashioned in comparison, as you would imagine, since you already know Alf, that Bairnsfatherish old pal from the last war, who got himself into such laughable scrapes when he was given six wishes in the manner of Aladdin. You remember how finally, in spite of his boozey pal Bill, he settled down with his sensible Liz in a little greengrocery business, and lived a comfortable, humdrum life, ruled benevolently by her and later by his daughter Annie, whom he worshipped.

But now, with a new war, comes a new button. Neglecting to learn from past experience, he consults Bill, instead of Liz, about the prospects. Of course, there is trouble, for Bill has large notions devoid of common-sense. The idea of bringing Hitler to book comes into the plot. But this plot is unexpectedly side-tracked by Annie, who innocently rubs the button one evening when she is dreaming about Anette Armitage, the world-glamouring film star whom she worships from afar. Now she suddenly finds herself a replica of the Armitage, complete with fabulous wardrobe, including the renowned mink coat. She is even dogged by the Oriental Khan known to have been spurned by the Armitage. What follows I dare not relate. But there is an abduction which might have had serious effects on Alf's domestic bliss had it not been for . . . but I must not say.

SHORT STORIES

Reviewed by H. E. BATES

DEPARTMENTAL anthologies, in which stories of a type are gathered together like underwear, fur-coats or bargain oddments on one floor, are often a failure; but the time is obviously exactly right for **Best Flying Stories**, edited by Norman Macmillan (Faber and Faber, 8s. 6d.), and the goods could hardly have been better selected. It is a volume compiled with generous and intelligent purpose. Presented with the easiest of opportunities for propaganda, Mr. Macmillan prefers to include only one story of the R.A.F., and incidentally of the present war, at the same time offering two of the old Zeppelin-Fokker German air-force and one of the pre-war Italian ("the Duce's noble profile" now sounds extra funny as coming from Marshal Balbo), together with accounts from French, American, Swiss, Dutch and Russian sources.

Fiction, notably represented by Mr. Eric Knight's fantasia, *The Flying Yorkshireman*, occupies, and I think rightly, a small place. No fiction could produce the effect of excited suspense created by the log-book documentation of *Pigeon Telegraph*, or by the B.O.P. (but excellent) simplicity of the editor's own story, *The Insalubrious Sea*, or by the tough nonchalance of the spy-aviator's diary, *Solo to Sorrows*. Most of these accounts, from that of Balbo's mass trans-Atlantic flight in the proud manner down to the reminiscence of the Dunstable gliders flying from one English village to another, have an amateur and inimitable freshness about them, the bloom of the pioneers. Even the remarkable *I Fought*

in the *Sky Over Dunkirk* is no exception; with its fantastic schoolboy terminology, its nonchalant simplicity, its entire absence of bravado, its air of having fun, it emerges as the most remarkable document of them all.

In Mr. T. O. Beachcroft's collection, *The Parents Left Alone* (John Lane, 7s. 6d.), the revolt against style, the desire not to be identified at all costs with anything cultured, is carried to extreme lengths; Mr. Beachcroft so submerges himself that his stories might have been written by anybody. Of all contemporary writers of the short story he is the most anonymous; he carries no distinctive mark of identification at all. But if this unobtrusive manner occasionally bores it is also capable of excellent effects; *His Fortieth Birthday*, in which a father observes his own reflection in his son, owes its quality to this same unpretentiousness; the crusty humour of *Poaching Isn't Theft* is like that of a homemade pie, which needs neither garnishing nor glazing to improve its flavour. Mr. Beachcroft's great virtue is that his people are always real people; he tolerates no magazine cut-outs. But sometimes I wish he would brush up his English.

Mr. Richard Hughes's *Don't Blame Me!* (Chatto and Windus, 5s.), being primarily for children, it occurred to me that a child's opinion might carry more weight than my own; so an eight-year-old set down her views. "This book," she writes, "is very nice. And I hope all boys and girls will enjoy it because I do think that the last and the first one were very nice. I think that the pictures illustrate the story very nice too. The story about the king and the 16 children I thought was very funny; I had a good laugh over it too. And about the little boy that ran away from his mother and father and took a boat and went to sea and found a lot of treasure and a magic poker. And all about the last one. I think that the crocodile was very funny. Really the book was very nice indeed." And what author could want more than that?

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Reviews by LILIAN ARNOLD

STARS ON THE SEA, by F. Van Wyck Mason (Jarrolds, 9s. 6d.), though a complete novel in itself, is the second volume of a series of four books in which the author designs to cover the whole history of the American War of Independence. Such a theme necessarily entails exhaustive research, and in this case research is made more difficult by the fact that contemporary records if voluminous in quantity are rarely unanimous. In the matter of the Siege of Charleston, for instance, the author found it necessary to study "item by item eight authentic accounts, all of which varied sharply as to detail."

Whatever the ultimate value of this book may prove historically, there is no doubt that as a novel offering a vividly tinted panorama of a nation in a period of volcanic evolution, it scores a brilliant success. Its characters are alive and for the most part sympathetic. The Bennetts, the Percivals, the Proveaux and the Dulacs may, as the author takes care to point out, be imaginary families, but they carry complete conviction. Even the sensational adventures of Desire Harmony Bennett, daughter of a Quaker and lover of a British naval officer, never strike one as over-drawn. Against a panorama in which no detail is insignificant, the inception of the American navy stands out as vitally important. The plight of any nation possessing a considerable seaboard but lacking a navy powerful enough to maintain a blockade is logically presented and strikes a poignantly topical note.

I cannot call this a cheerful book. There are details, especially in connection with the treatment of slaves in the French colonies, that make one shudder, but it is a book which holds the attention.

There is a good old-fashioned flavour about

JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY

January 3, 1941

Page 368

Secret of the Marshbanks, by Kathleen Norris (John Murray, 8s. 6d.), although its scenes are laid in modern California. The chancing heir (in this case an heiress) is well known in Victorian fiction, but Mrs. Norris has handled her theme so well, as, indeed, did those same Victorians, that she almost persuades us that it is new as well as entertaining. Cherry Rawlings is a lovable character, especially when contrasted with the rubbishy little butterfly whom she supplants. This is a book of engrossing quality.

Sophisticated Nymph, by Kitty Lessells (Herbert Jenkins, 7s. 6d.), is primarily a love story, with a background of the theatre, which has already appeared in serial form. The author writes with a certain zest, but her English is slipshod and her spelling careless. If she should be contemplating a sequel, may I—in all humility—suggest that she keep a dictionary handy and when in doubt enquire within?

THE R.A.F. AT WORK

It is safe to say that everyone in this country and millions outside it are deeply interested in the doings of the Royal Air Force, but, necessarily, precise information is hard to come by. A good deal, however, is now "released," and the enquiring enthusiast of any age may safely be recommended to a new publication, *The R.A.F. in Action* (Black, 7s. 6d.). There is a concise and illuminating survey of recent air activities, and a collection of a hundred and one remarkable photographs. These show characteristic pilots and crews, and close-up photographs of Hurricanes, Spitfires, Lysonsers, Blenheims, Wellingtons, and so on, in the air and on the ground. Also included are some very fine aerial photographs, taken by night as well as by day, and interesting records of damage done to military objectives in Germany. One of the finest of these last illustrations shows a bombing attack on Berlin itself. Another is of the *Altmark* in the Jossing Fiord, and another shows bombs falling on an Italian aerodrome in Libya. Altogether this is a most comprehensive tribute to a body of men of whom the whole nation is proud, and it should be noted that a royalty from the sale of every copy will be given to the Royal Air Force Fund.

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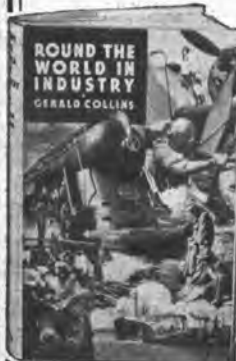
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