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TALES OF THE OCCULT

Reviews by H. E. BATES

MR. ALGERNON BLACKWOOD published his first book when I was teething; I have to confess that I have never read him in any quantity. But one story from his meaty volume, *The Tales of Algernon Blackwood* (Secker, 8s. 6d.), which by the way is three books in one, was enough to convince me of his quality. Not many short story writers of the year 1906 will stand the contemporary test as well as Mr. Blackwood. In a looking-backward kind of preface he explains how and why these stories were written and why they deal so largely with his favourite subject, the occult. The preface is very intelligent and very interesting, but I get the feeling that he did not want to write it. "Let me leave the stories to speak for themselves," he says finally, and I think wisely, as though he knows how useless it is to speak for stories written almost in another age and almost by another man. As he points out, neither Dunne's Serial Universe nor Ouspensky's other-dimensional time had disturbed the horizon of the world in which these stories were written. Which was perhaps as well. Whether these stories will stand the colossal square-inch pressure of contemporary time-theorists and physics I don't know, but they stand the tests for good workmanship and entertainment. Mr. Blackwood, writing of exaggerations and the fantastic, knows that the surest way to conviction lies in the use of a style that has nothing to do with exaggeration or fantasy. He keeps his feet very firmly on the ground. In *The Listener*, for example, a deservedly well-known horror story, he creates the illusion of reality by an emphasis on commonplace detail: "Milk and sugar, 7d., bread, 6d., butter, 8d., marmalade, 6d., eggs, 1s. 8d., laundress, 2s. 9d., oil, 6d., attendance, 5s., total 12s. 2d.," which is the weekly budget of the young man whose lodgings are so disturbed by strange happenings. Thus, before you know where you are, you believe in the young man, the strange house, and, almost, the strange visitor. This is the art of a writer with all his buttons on. So if you feel like a little cold goose-flesh for supper and that strange feeling of someone walking upstairs to bed behind you, making you nip into the bathroom extra quickly, let me recommend Mr. Blackwood.

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It is almost ten years since Miss Norah Hault sprang her magnificent *Poor Women* on the world of the short story. The volume produced, and rightly, something like a sensation, and Arnold Bennett said of Miss Hault, "She convinces you; she will count." Since that time Miss Hault has not convinced quite so much and, while nothing can detract from the achievement of *Poor Women*, I do not think she counts quite so much. When she arrived she had stolen nobody's technique; now her

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NEW NOVELS TO READ—

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technique no longer looks so original. Once, as a small boy, I knitted a dish-cloth. I knitted with very large stitches and, though you could never mistake the resulting article for a dish-cloth, you could at the same time see through it. I am reminded of that dish-cloth when I read Miss Hoult's **Nine Years is a Long Time** (Heinemann, 7s. 6d.), her latest volume of stories. So many of these sixteen stories seem to have been loosely stitched, so that you can see through them. They are in a class completely remote from the taut, firm-stitched work of the first volume. I always hated to see Miss Hoult leave the short story for the novel, and now I am convinced my feelings were right. The novel can be loose-stitched, even needs to be loose-stitched, but not the short story. Somehow Miss Hoult has got the technique of one mixed up with the technique of the other. And while none of these stories are duds, none are great, few really efficient. For all that I still hold my hat in readiness to take off to Miss Hoult as soon as the chance allows.

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If you enjoy **Mr. A. E. Coppard's** peculiar mixture of fantastic satire and realism you should enjoy **Tapster's Tapestry** (Golden Cockerel Press, 8s. 6d.). I am personally a stickler for the other Mr. Coppard, who shook a still earlier short story world than Miss Hoult's with *Adam and Eve and Pinch Me* and *Clorinda Walks in Heaven*. As a fantastic satirist Mr. Coppard has never yet convinced me and does not convince me here. His insistence on differentiating between a story and a tale, a story being written and a tale being told, has never seemed to me worth logically carrying out. As carried out by Mr. Coppard it has too often resulted, as here, in sticky humour and a slap-you-on-the-back kind of heartiness that doesn't carry any weight with me as a substitute for the vigour of a story like *The Higglers*.