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NEW FICTION

Old Man River in a Great Rich Novel

By H. E. BATES

Green Margins. By E. P. O'Donnell.
(Eyre and Spottiswoode. 7s. 6d.)

The Happy Return. By C. S. Forester.
(Michael Joseph. 7s. 6d.)

Plague in Bombay. By Nora Stevenson.
(Cape. 7s. 6d.)

Plaque with Laurel. By M. Barnard
Eldershaw. (Harrap. 7s. 6d.)

"GREEN MARGINS" is a big book. It is odd to think of its selling 90,000 copies in America; whereas Victorian America would probably have lynched Mr. O'Donnell for writing it at all. It is a rich-coloured, fleshly chronicle in the prevailing American panoramic fashion, a book crowded with colour and figures, half romantic, half realistic, drenched in atmosphere. Mr. O'Donnell's scene is the Mississippi Delta; his characters are the most odd mixed bastard race of Creoles and Cajins, immigrants from Greece and Dalmatia and Italy and Germany, and negroes of all colours. He has two main characters, a girl, Sister, left with an illegitimate child whose father she will not marry; and the river itself, the Mississippi, which dominates the whole book with something like the foreboding power of Egdon Heath in "The Return of the Native." Mr. O'Donnell never consciously admits the river as protagonist; but you are never allowed to forget it; always, through 500 pages, it is there, huge, mysterious, a great lump of primitive life binding and shaping and dominating all the other life in the book. The degree of Mr. O'Donnell's saturation in the atmosphere of that river is not the least of many admirable things in "Green Margins."

Urchin of the Riverside

But if the river dominates everything, the portrait of Sister certainly outshines everything. This richly physical, deeply spiritual portrait of a girl growing from a raw, almost half-civilised creature, an urchin of the riverside, to a fully articulate woman is wonderfully penetrative and artistically exciting. And in many other ways, atmospherically, for instance, the book will satisfy the greediest: all the brawling, raw, hot-fleshed life of the Delta is here, with the smell of the river, the oyster beds, the marshes, the wild-fowl, the water-hyacinths, the wind-swept levee, the shipping. Like all its tribe, the book suffers, occasionally, from the gas of overstatement being left too high. Its emotions and colours boil over them like jam, into that wordy stickiness that Americans now adore and demand in their reactions to Mr. Hemingway. For the rest, a full-veined, milky book, - extraordinarily fascinating, pregnant with an almost fabulous life.

After much anticipation, I am woefully disappointed in Mr. G. S. Forester. His book, chosen by the Book Society, might almost have been written by the Book Society, sitting in select committee. Still worse, it might have been written by anybody. Picking up "Green Margins," you could not fail to notice an individual, compelling accent; whereas the prose of "THE HAPPY RETURN" would floor everybody, a hundred per cent., in a game of guess the author at a Christmas party. No colour here, no tang, no saltiness, no excess of statement. Yet this is a sea-story, though the frigate Lydia, commanded by Captain Hornblower, might just as easily be sailing the Serpentine as the romantic seas off the coast of Nicaragua. The book is really a story of that astonishing creature, Lady Barbara Wellesley, who demands to be taken home in the Lydia from Panama, where yellow-fever has broken out. I see the book less as a novel than as a scenario for a successor to "Mutiny on the Bounty," with Mr. Clark Gable, as the taciturn Captain Hornblower, skirmishing with Miss Rosalind Russell, perhaps, as the Lady Barbara, and all the skirmishes and bloody cannonading with Spaniards and Spanish rebels as stirring background. Unadventurously written, this story of adventure cries out to be man-handled by Hollywood. Mr. Forester, I feel, and hope, can do far better than this happily titled, not-so-happy book.

Luxury Liner

Miss Nora Stevenson's "PLAGUE IN BOMBAY" is also a sea-story, and there is no mistaking it. You can lay no charge of cardboard romanticism against Miss Stevenson. Her luxury liner, bound for a plague-stricken Bombay with only eleven first-class passengers, is luxurious all right, and you are made to feel and taste its hot-house, brittle, artificial atmosphere as though you were sailing in it. You are, in fact, the twelfth passenger; you drink the million-dollar cocktails of the rich Jew Levy; you see the Portuguese honeymoon pair making love all over the deck; you see the drama of Horace Appleby, once clerk, now Levy's aide-de-camp, and his dream-come-true love-affair with the lady Jean. You see more; thanks to Miss Stevenson you see not only the outward, artificial dramas, but the inner conflicts, the jealousies, fears, hopes, dreams, of all the curiously assorted people on this ship. It is a dramatic, clever little book, shrewd, realistic. It ought to be on the shelves of all luxury liners.

Two in One

"M. Barnard Eldershaw" conceals the identity of two writers—two Australian ladies, who now perform, for the fourth time, their very versatile two-hearts-beating-as-one act, the astonishing performance of writing a novel together. This collaboration seems to me to have one huge disadvantage; for whereas the virtues of these two writers appear as the virtues of one writer, their faults stick out like a double array of candles stuck in a single birthday cake commemorating their combined ages. I can't help feeling that it might be better for them, and us, if they each gave us, for a change, a one-woman show. Much of their story of the conference at which a plaque is unveiled to a famous novelist, Richard Crake, and the subsequent piecing together by dialogue, gossips, scraps of information, of the private life of that novelist, is fashion-magazine stuff. To one woman this novelist was a lover, to another a failure and a husband, to a man a genius and friend. To my mind he seems scarcely worth the plaque, the women, or the double act on the literary trapeze.
