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FRESH FICTION

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All About Radium in a
Big Novel

Planned by
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By L. L.
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By H. E. BATES
Radium. By Rudolf Brunngraber.
(Harrap, 7a, 6d.)
Marching Shadows. By John Gray.
Carroll, 7a, 6d.)
Best in the Greenwood. By Frederick
Lambert. (Harrap, 7a, 6d.)
The Ravels and Escapes. By Robert
Garson. (Constable, 7a, 6d.)

"Radium" is the most important novel
on this list, but it also stands an excellent
chance of being the least popular. For at
least a hundred pages it reads like a
scientific report and the fact that it has
sold 15,000 copies in Germany will not
influence English readers who will find
much of it as dull as a lesson in trigonometry. For myself I find much of it
even duller than that, which is saying
something. But if ever Herr Brunngraber's
book is read, as it ought to be and as
I hope it will be, it should stand side by
side, at once, with "The Life of Louis
Pasteur." The book, in fact, cries out to be
filmed. The screen is exactly the
place for the unfolding of the continuing
of the discovery of radium, as it was
exactly the place for the unfolding of
Pasteur's fight against disease. Dramati-
cally translated into pictures, Herr
Brunngraber's hundreds of pages, im-
portant and no doubt laboriously dis-
covered facts would become exciting, the
novel they are hard to assimilate at
all.

There is nothing wrong with the idea
of this book, which is to show how, by a
chance discovery in 1896, Becquerel's
Paris laboratory in 1898, the most mis-
tious element of modern times was to be
brought to the world's notice; of how the
young woman who made that discovery
was to change her name from Mary
Skłodowska to Marya Curie; of how she
and her husband Pierre were to work and
experiment until the existence of the new
element had been established beyond
doubt; of how that element was influ-
ence not only the lives of scientists, but
the lives of all kinds of people, famous and
obscure, throughout the world; of how
the Big Business was to step into the
game; of how natives in Africa were to be
exploited in a mad urge for riches; of how,
in particular, radium was to change the
lives of an English doctor, an engineer in
Colombia, and a financier in Brussels;
and finally of how tragedy and drama are
engendered by the workings of this new
and terrific protagonist.

Scientific Jargon

There is nothing wrong with this. The
problem is whether the novel, classic
medium though it is, is elastic enough to
be stuffed with thousands of words of
scientific jargon and yet remain a work
of fiction. As for instance—
"To extract from the 10,000 kilo-
grammes (10 metric tons) of uranium
residues 100 kilogrammes (nearly 200 lbs.)
of an emanation sulphate, in which
barium sulphate predominates—a
medley that was six times more radio-
active than uranium, and was to form the
starting-point for further attempts to
isolate the essential radioactive substance
—needed six weeks' hard work."
This is a mild example of Herr
Brunngraber's manner. "MARCIA
"Marcia Skłodowska" is a young
human book, which suffers from being
at once naive and overwritten. It con-
cerns the life of a girl rejected by a
rapacious millionaire who profits in a
small way by the sale of wartime food-
stuffs to neighbours; she loses her lover
in Flanders, sinks to the pavement of
the Waterloo-road and finally finds some
sort of solace in affection for a prisoner
of war in Sussex. There is nothing wrong
with this theme either, but only, once
again, in the handling of it, Mr Gray is
a master in the art of the pathetic inver-
sion, which is a sort of second cousin to
the pathetic fallacy. This consists in a
refusal to say a plain thing plainly and
a trick of inversion for emotional effect,
well known and much practiced by
writers of sub-stuff and, in the past, of
film sub-titles: "Akin to a wild-cat she
fought as though for her very life."

Star-Spangled Manner

The next two books are both American,
stylish, easy, atmospherically convinc-
ing, emotionally well-light and as near
as anything fool-proof. It is perhaps not
for nothing that they teach the art of
fiction-writing in American schools.
"Born in the Gasworks" is the story
of an old lady who goes once a year to
visit a sister in New York. This old
battle-axe, as Mr. William Powell would
call her, leaves her peaceful Connecticut
home and goes to endure for a short time
a life of cocktail parties, smart young
things, modern music, and people who
laugh at her admiration for the plays of
Barrie. This clash of two generations
produces nothing really exciting, nothing
at all momentous. Mr. Lambek has style,
a sense of reality and emotion, and yet
manages to do nothing very much.
Purely as a novel, "The Ravels and
Escapes" is the best thing of the week.
Mr. Carson gives us here a new version
of that tough situation with which we
are so often presented by Hollywood, the
returned convict. When Phillip Cloud
murdered his wife's lover he was a sensi-
tive, likeable, successful young man.
When he left prison, eight years later, he
was a man obsessed by one idea; to give
all and take nothing. Out of this situa-
tion Mr. Carson has made a direct, terse,
outspoken novel; not a nice book, but
not a dull one.

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