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ed by E. B. Osborn

NEW FICTION

Bantam Week: Some Small But Delicious Eggs

By H. E. BATES

Star-Begotten. By H. G. Wells. (Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.)

Rose Forbes. By George Buchanan. (Constable. 7s. 6d.)

Brother Petree's Return. By "S. M. C." (Chatto and Windus. 7s. 6d.)

The Bridge Builders. By Max Eyth. (Sampson Low. 8s.)

Mr. Wells is reported to have once said to Mr. David Garnett, apropos of Mr. Garnett's talent for short-length fiction: "It's all very well, Garnett, but you only lay one bantam's egg every two years." I hope I may be excused the repetition of this joke, which now happens to be on Mr. Wells, who has suddenly taken to laying bantam's eggs, himself. After "The Croquet Player," also a small egg, comes "Star-Begotten," a novel of less than 200 pages. As the novels of Mr. Buchanan, "S. M. C." and Herr Eyth are all of almost exactly the same length, this week might very well be called Bantam week—and a very good week, too.

The first thing that strikes me about "Star-Begotten" is its adventurous virility; the second its youthfulness. Mr. Wells is a man of 70 and "Star-Begotten" is a performance on the tight-rope. The book purports to be a fantasy, which it is; but it is something much more. Mr. Wells has always been an author who appeared, often, to be playing innocent games with the bricks and puffer-trains of the fantastic; the whole fascinating aspect of which was changed when you observed that he carried a stiletto in his pocket and was walking along his tight-rope and we look up in admiration, until we observe that he has a bomb suspended from his trousers' leg.

Mars Again

Mr. Wells's own title for "Star-Begotten" is "A Biological Fantasia." It concerns the trouble experienced in the mind of a Mr. Joseph Davis, to whom it occurs that the inhabitants of Mars, being so much older and more highly developed in intellect than ourselves, have reached the stage when they find it possible to transmit cosmic rays to earth, and by them change the whole nature of human life and development. A fantastic idea, true; but also as possible and credible as many similar fantasies that have afterwards turned out to be realities. The wife of Mr. Joseph Davis is about to have a child, and one of the fantastic notions that trouble Davis, as it might trouble any of us, is whether that child might turn out to be, perhaps, star-begotten! All these fantastic notions so get hold of Mr. Davis and his friends, Professor Keppel and Dr. Stedding, that, in the end, the thing is front-page news. This is, naturally, just the stuff for Mr. Wells, who goes into it all with immense energy and imagination, and makes of this small novel a tour de force. This book needs a score of adjectives for its adequate praise. Picking out half a dozen, I would say that it is at once delicious, cunning, satirical, brilliant, prophetic, and, if I may say so, star-begotten.

Hats Off to Mr. Buchanan

But there are laurels for other heads than Mr. Wells's! "Rose Forbes" is a short, beautiful novel which, though so short, conveys the impression of being leisurely and full. In prose which by its assured and distinguished brevity makes the prose of many a 700-page best-seller sound as trite and windy as the speeches of small-town councilors, Mr. Buchanan tells the story of an unknown woman, Rose Forbes, an obscure, troubled soul who, never happy after the drowning of her first husband, goes through trial and suffering until she reaches a peaceful maturity. This may itself, to some readers, sound trite. To me Mr. Buchanan's approach and handling of this simple theme is a delight. He is never obscure, never shallow or banal. He keeps the whole of his book on a plane where spirituality and realism are combined with perfection. He is an artist whose strength lies in his concise subtlety and in his powers of implication, and in "Rose Forbes" he has given us a pocket classic.

The initials "S. M. C." conceal the identity of a Dominican nun. Having an inherent distrust of publishers' blurbs, I was not struck by this fact until the book was read. "Brother Petree's Return" had by that time impressed me by its masculinity, together with the feeling that it must be the work of some slightly rebellious lay-brother. All this is so much praise for "S. M. C." whoever she may be, who, like Mr. Wells, gives us a story "founded on a hypothesis not at all impossible," which is that miracles may still happen. Her miracle is the return, after 400 years, of a certain Brother Petree to a community of Benedictine monks in Cornwall, and we are shown, in a story that has something of the air of allegory about it, the effect on the mind of an Elizabethan monk not only of a world of cars and wireless but of a world in which even spiritual exercise has undergone a change. Also short, this book is also delightful: succinct and cool, classical and yet alive.

A Matter of Calculation

Finally, a fine shapely little bantam's egg from Germany; though, if it is not heresy to say so, it reads more as if it came from France. In "THE BRIDGE BUILDERS" Max Eyth tells the story of how, in the late Nineteenth Century, a great bridge was built over the two-mile span of a Scottish Firth; of the men who planned and built it; of the immense and almost ecstatic absorption of the engineer in his task; of his nervous pre-occupation with the problem of wind-pressure; his obsession with that problem; and of the final annihilation of the bridge in a storm. All this has, of course, a recognizable parallel in history. Herr Eyth has a forceful, lively style, energetically translated by Mr. H. F. L. Robinson, which gives it the double fascination of fact and fancy, making out of it a book at once terse and exciting, emotional and without nonsense.

A THRILLER

Mr. Bude's tale "THE CHELTENHAM MURDER" (Skeffington, 7s. 6d.) undeniably holds the reader's attention in spite of its inherent improbabilities. The reader of thrillers is a patient person, but it is doubtful whether he will be patient enough to absorb without reflection all the assumptions and artifice employed in this story. It is worth reading, and grips during reading, for the character drawing and the general wise scenes are very good, but its merits will hardly survive collection. Still it did entertain during a tedious journey.

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TRAWLERS IN NORTH

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"The Happy Home," by (Stanley Paul, 12s. 6d.), a New Zealander who round the world, with not even a stitch of cloth naked, by the terms of New Zealand hotel, but to Australia, to Brit lectured and got as far knew (Rowton House), Hong Kong. It is an ente very exceptional, record

There is a bit of all Ode's Harris's life story, PLACES (Stanley Paul. Mr. Ode has been every everything. After school minister, he entered Me parsons' sons!—the Bu Company, and saw servi Carcavello, at Suez, Mauritius (much fun and the ten-mile-by-four stat

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