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NEW FICTION

Pumpkin Pie, Sausage and Mash

By H. E. BATES

A Lamp in the Plains. By Paul Hogan. (Constable, 8s. 6d.)

Carnival at Blackport. By J. M. Hodson. (Collings, 7s. 6d.)

A House in the Park. By Ronald Fraser. (Dapp, 8s. 6d.)

Star Maker. By Olaf Stapledon. (Methuen, 9s. 6d.)

I put "A LAMP IN THE PLAINS" at the head of the week's list because, if it is a failure, it is at least a notable failure. Mr. Hogan is a notable writer. He has written a good many short stories, and in "No Quarter Given," a long novel, he wrote a really distinguished book, in which sobriety and passion governed each other to perfection. What exactly has happened to Mr. Hogan between that book and this it is hard to say. Much of "A Lamp in the Plains," though it echoes the distinction of the earlier book, reads like some treacle-fingered copy of the worst efforts of William Faulkner.

Like so many of Faulkner's books, its action is centred about a small American township, Vrain, at which a young man, Danny Milford, arrives with a few dollars in his pocket and no prospects. Almost at the same time arrives a sort of pseudo-Professor, Winston Burlington, a disappointed fraud, who tricks and exploits the townsfolk until they rise against him. Burlington befriends Danny, giving purpose to his ambitions, and we are given subsequently the history of the boy's life, his love affairs, his career at a military college, together with which we get a full picture both of the Professor and of the town of Vrain.

All this, which might have been first-rate, is presented in a style which alternates between pompous simplicity ("late at night it turned a little cooler, in a sudden waft of the great domain of the air") and just simple pomposity. They muffled their godless views, at least; and they inebd themselves against the wall; tributes to the awfulness of the way to which he was privy"; and, as long as Mr. Hogan continues to write with that pretentious mediocrity, he will, I am afraid, have at least one reader less.

Blackport by the Seaside

After this too-filling, sumptuously served American meal, it is a relief to sit down to the plate of sausage-and-mash and good hot cup of tea served up by Mr. Hodson. Here you have no pretensions at all. "CARNIVAL AT BLACKPORT" is a book to which you can sit down in your shirt-sleeves, elbows on table. If the sausage tastes slightly of wheels and the tea has sand in it, what matter? We know where we are. We recognise the town, the promenade, the boarding-house with the brass plate outside, the song-pluggers on the sands, the amusement park, the girls getting the glad-eye on the pier in the summer dusk; and how well most of us know it.

And here, I think, lies the test for Mr. Hodson. The more familiar the life, the more difficult, generally speaking, the art of portraying it. We know Blackport so well, is it any use reading Mr. Hodson? In my opinion, yes. The living, as you might say of Mrs. Rivington's boarding-house, is plain but good; it is humble but the rest thing. In the characters of Mr. Levhold, the Jew, Jake and Laura, Gladia and Ted, and all the rest of the people who pop in and out of Mrs. Rivington's and have their fortunes told on the sands and get "a good cup of tea for 2d." under the Pier, we meet people firmly and authentically alive.

In London—in the Park

For me the most welcome announcement about Mr. Fraser is that he has turned back from the exotic to the familiar. In the London house in the park we are worlds removed from those precious novels and fantasy which made his earlier reputation, and I for one find the change more than welcome. The world here is Regent's Park, with small excursions to Primrose Hill later changing to Spain and Flanders. Mr. Fraser's hero and heroine are twins, Bobbie and Helia Stokes, though it is clear from his title that he regards the house itself as the major protagonist, and he is right. The house is at once extraordinary and fascinating.

Few houses in London stand in a park, among trees, by a lake. It was not in its own park, or beside its own water, that quaint house stood; it was a public park, and on Saturdays and Bank Holidays the lake fairly swarmed with boats. But the public were effectively shut out from the house and its grounds. It was surprising how little it could be seen from the lake or from the road. In summer, at any rate, the house was almost entirely hidden among chestnuts, elms, laburnums, lilacs, privets, rhododendrons, and bamboos; only its roofs and chimneys were visible or some attic window shining down a green glade.

Silver and Luxury

In this beautiful house the twins grew up. It is a world of silver and luxury, good taste and expensive toys. Their parents have money; their Uncle Harry has money. They have nothing to fear and they are devoted to each other. Their Uncle Harry, a charming figure, supplies also the dash and spice ("he said dangerous, disturbing and very wicked things") which makes life adventurous. This uncle, admirably drawn by Mr. Fraser, plays an important and decisive part in the formation of the twin's characters and in their double and complementary lives which, as time goes on and war and love intervene, tend to fork apart into separate tragedy, only to rejoin again in happiness. This mysterious spiritual devotion of one twin for another is admirably done, as also are the descriptions of the house itself and Spain. The book is at once warm and alert, delicate but never precious, a mature and intelligent handling of unusual lives and an unusual theme.

"STAR MAKER" is not a novel, but as a fantasy it belongs truly to the realm of fiction. Mr. Stapledon calls it "an imaginary exploration of the cosmos. Any elaboration of this description would be necessarily long and probably tedious. I will only add that in exploring the life of remote planetary life the book develops a subtle and in some ways terrifying criticism of our own, and that it ought to be read by all people with courage and any pretensions to social consciousness at all.

OLD INNS OF THE CITY

Dr. Kenneth Rogers's "SIGNS AND TAVERNS ROUND ABOUT OLD LONDON BRIDGE" (Homeand Association, 8s. 6d.) is a book for the London antiquary, filled with notes on the history of the taverns that were, so to speak, the foreigners' introduction to England, grouped as they were round the only land entrance to the city from the south, from France, &c., over the Bridge.

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