

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

= By CHARLES POORE =

THE post-Dostoyevskyan studies in crime and punishment begun here yesterday bring us this morning to a consideration of the three new novels by Elspeth Huxley, Rex Stout and Frances and Richard Lockridge.*

Thumbprints on the Sands of Crime

Not many travel books cover so much of the earth's surface as do most detective stories. Whether in search of fresh clues or antique poisons, they take you through a huge variety of places.

Indeed, one of the pleasures of reading these patterns in felony is that you see so many interesting countries. And one imagines that if an aficionado of mystery tales put a pin in a wall map for every new place encountered in his readings, the record of vicarious travel in pursuit of vicarious crime would be astonishing.

We don't know when we've read more interesting descriptions of African life than we've found in Mrs. Huxley's "The African Poison Murders." She is, as you've probably noticed, a sound novelist as well as a gifted clue-dropper, and here, in the course of a tale involving various white settlers in a British colony not very far from the Abyssinian border, she brings the country as well as the characters to life.

Death and the Heart of Darkness

It would be overstating the case to say that we were enthusiastic about the solution that Mrs. Huxley gives you at the end. And we found the forest fire more convincing than Vachell's gruesome adventure in the leopard trap; the account of Nazi machination (in England this novel was called "Death of an Aryan") more realistic than the spook-work by night. Which puts us in the odd position of believing more in the characters than in some of the things they are made to do. Nevertheless, as charade or as travel book, we recommend it.

In "Over My Dead Body" Mr. Stout, while confining most of the action of this new and entertaining Nero Wolfe escapade to New York, man-

**THE NORTHS MEET MURDER.* By Frances and Richard Lockridge. 309 pages. Stokes. \$2.

OVER MY DEAD BODY. By Rex Stout. 293 pages. Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.

THE AFRICAN POISON MURDERS. By Elspeth Huxley. 279 pages. Harpers. \$2.

ages to give us some vigorous vignettes of Balkan politics. Nero, as you know, can scarcely be stirred from his beer and orchids these days. The rushing around is done for him by the unquenchable Archie, and—for the people of New York—by the far from precocious Detective Cramer.

Nero and His Balkan Past

There was a time, however, when Nero got more actively about the world. It seems that once, in his younger days, he acquired a Balkan past. And elements in that past returned to plague him, as well as to help him to arrive at the proper conclusions, when the affair of the Montenegrin girls and the rapier murder at the fencing academy came his way.

A scene in which Archie, pretending to search for a non-existent cat, escapes over a couple of back fences, is not to be missed. We're pretty sure that this alone would be enough to make yesterday's customs officer want to call it to the attention of Mr. Hitchcock. Then, too, there's the unmasking of the lady whose real name was Pansy Bupp. That's better than all Nero's orchids.

If you've enjoyed reading about the Norths in Mr. Lockridge's contributions to *The New Yorker*, you'll want to read "The Norths Meet Murder." In fact, you'll want to read it anyway, whether or not you've ever heard of them before. The fine, careless genius of Mrs. North's penetrating non sequiturs is just right for the informal murder the Lockridges have arranged.

The Norths and a Killer

The fly-leaf notation that all the characters—except Pete, the cat—are imaginary, won't prevent you from imagining you see signs of sketching from life here and there. Weigand, the detective, is a distinct addition to the chronicles of modern crime. His assistant, Mullins, is also good, with his profound belief that the case is whacky from the start (Mrs. North finds the corpse in the vacant studio she'd planned to use for a party) to the bizarre end.

And as for travel literature, "The Norths Meet Murder" supplies some of the shrewdest notations on the folklore of Manhattan we've seen in a long time.

We're glad that customs officer didn't get these three books away from us. Ha!

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