

INGROWING ECSTASY

By Herbert S. Gorman

IF the test of inspired literature be ecstasy, as Arthur Machen affirms, both Alfred Noyes and Gene Stratton-Porter may, with all logic, be established as authentic creators. Certainly there is enough ecstasy in "Watchers of the Sky" and "The Fire Bird". Yet a reading of both long poems curiously enough leaves the reader with unquickenened pulses. Passion and a vibrant idealism have passed in colorful array before him, yet the books are

calmly put down and immediately forgotten. There is obviously something the matter with the ecstasy of Mr. Noyes and Mrs. Stratton-Porter. It does not communicate itself to the reader. It is an ingrowing ecstasy. Although it may keep both the versifiers awake it possesses quite the reverse urge for its readers. Perhaps a brief investigation of the reasons why this ecstasy does not function may not be amiss.

The case of Mrs. Stratton-Porter is simple. In spite of "The Fire Bird" and her publishers, she is not a poet. It remains but to be pointed out that her book contains an interesting Indian legend which rises to its climax in excellent style but which does not possess a single line that may properly be offered as containing that divine substance which we call poetry. The only lift in "The Fire Bird" is the tautened interest as the reader dashes on through the lines. Color and movement are to be discerned compact with an admirable use of Indian properties. The stage is well set but the actors do not sing.

Mr. Noyes's book is of different timbre. It is rather silly to assert that he is not a poet, for he has given ample proof of a robust lyrical quality. That quality is being steadily choked by a rampant sentimentalism and an insistence on broaching a "message" to his readers. Added to these drawbacks is the lack of a sense of humor. "Watchers of the Sky" is the first volume in a series to be called "The Torch Bearers". In this particular venture he retells the stories of certain great astronomers, Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Sir William Herschel, and Sir John Herschel. Instead of flying straightway into the stars as one would expect Mr. Noyes to do with such subject matter,

he narrates the careers of these pioneers of the heavens in the form of rather loose blank verse stories and monologues, occasionally broken up with songs and choruses. At times his narratives disintegrate into bombast; at other times a treacly sentimentalism spoils them; still again his blank verse is but fair prose chopped into lines. Yet through all these inequalities runs a golden thread of the poetic urge. It flares up in a phrase here and manifests itself in a lyric note there. And added to this partially hidden poetic urge is the undeniable fact that the subject matter of "Watchers of the Sky" is quite absorbing. These figures of the past, no matter how they are mishandled or how "cosmic" an interpretation is put upon their careers, thrill the reader. Indeed, it may be safe to assert that the book will be more enjoyed if it is read not at all for poetry but as a series of romantic marginal notes on great astronomers.

Mr. Noyes is filled with the ecstasy of his theme. Yet that ecstasy hardly stirs the reader. I am reminded of a man who cannot refrain from laughing while telling a humorous story or from weeping while telling a poignant tale. In other words, Mr. Noyes has no self possession. His emotion is not coordinated and calculated to arouse the reader. The tiresome spectacle of the poet over-sentimentalizing, continually erupting in pæans of praise for a world that simply *must* be saved, and always satisfying himself with three words when one will do, is everlastingly before the reader. This is altogether regrettable, for fifteen years ago Mr. Noyes was on the verge of a great reputation that might have been made permanent if he had schooled himself, used discretion, and contented himself with writing fine, robust, swinging lyrics. Instead of this he de-

veloped a Messiah complex. The man who wrote "Forty Singing Sailors" and "The Highwayman" (arrant sentimentality both, but unforgettable in their swing) turned to cosmic chants, ethical disturbances, and inspirational endeavors. The undertaking upon which Mr. Noyes is embarked now should effectually demolish him as a poet. Writing about "torch bearers" is, for him, a dangerous proceeding, for he cannot resist swinging the torch violently.

Watchers of the Sky. By Alfred Noyes.
Frederick A. Stokes Co.
The Fire Bird. By Gene Stratton-Porter.
Doubleday, Page and Co.