way in two different houses, arouses our curiosity at once. There is none of that tedious repetition and quartering of the ground which enables some of the older school of detection writers to last the distance. *The Opera House Murders,* a first novel, is designed to the formula of "a thrill on every page," and very nearly brings it off—that is, if you are prepared to have your feelings thoroughly harrowed and enjoy free fights where nothing is barred. There is more to this novel, however, than the rough stuff: the dialogue has a certain zip, and the thrills avoid monotony. NICHOLAS BLAKE.

Mountain Chronicles Continued

Helvellyn to Himalaya. By F. Spencer Chapman. (Chatto and Windus. 18s.)

My Alpine Album. By F. S. Smythe. (A. and C. Black. 12s. 6d.)

AMONG climbers Mr. Chapman has the reputation of being a bit cracked; his decisions are sudden, and once they are made he throws himself at his objective with a desperate determination that nothing less than his own skill and endurance could justify. Certainly, in spite of his well-meaning attempts to find a steady occupation and to subordinate exploration and mountaineering to it, his biography, as he records it in this book, seems to describe not so much a life as the wild and erratic career of a rapidly projected ball ricochetting round a bagatelle board. Readers of *Northern Lights* and *Lhasa: The Holy City* know that Mr. Chapman can write well; and although he explains that the war prevented him from revising his manuscript, there is very little to complain about in the present book. There are stories of climbing at home and in the Alps (including his motor-bike smash at 50 m.p.h. on his way back from the Meije: "I managed to catch the boat at Havre that night"), then expeditions to Iceland and Greenland, and attempts on Simvu (unsuccessful), Chomolhari and other Himalayan peaks. The six horrible days of his descent from Chomolhari (24,000 feet), with the porter Pasang dazed and exhausted, are particularly well told: perhaps the record of his vivid dreams in the tiny sodden tent on that immense crevassed ice-slope are more revealing than the details of the climb itself. General Bruce was not far wrong in calling that descent the Eighth Wonder of the World.

But Mr. Chapman has eyes for other things than ice and rock: his book is crammed with deep-purple *primula Royalei,* saffron rhododendrons, azalea and blue poppies; burrhal, marmots, mouse-hares and invisible snow-leopards scamper across his pages; and the air is thick with lammergeiers, horned larks, snow-cock, rose-finches and Tibetan redstarts. As for the villages, they are "dirt, dirt, grease, smoke, misery, but good mutton," as Thomas Manning said when he looked in at Phari in 1811. Mr. Chapman is a careful chronicler (but the Inaccessible Pinnacle is on Sgurr Dearg, not Sgurr nan Gillean), he has written a thoroughly good book of its kind, and his illustrations are numerous, varied and often dramatic.

Mr. Smythe's *Alpine Album* is the fourth of his picture-books, and it is his third publication this year. The pictures (some of which have appeared in his other books) range from the Gross Glockner to Mont Blanc, and from winter scenes near Zermatt to the clean simplicity of Swiss domestic architecture. There is a general introduction headed "The Alpine Year," and there are notes on each picture. "This is all I know about Bern without looking it up," implies a neat criticism of some other books. Perhaps Mr. Smythe's American friend was not the first to say that he would stick to *terra firma* in future, "more firmer and less terror," but on the whole Mr. Smythe avoids chestnuts and clichés, and his book is a good substitute for Blodig's *Alpine Calendar.* MICHAEL ROBERTS.

A Stoneworker's Story

Purbeck Shop. By Eric Benfield. (Cambridge University Press. 12s. 6d.)

THE Cambridge University Press has a happy knack of discovering the articulate country craftsman. To those two admirable biographies, *The Wheelwright's Shop* and *The Village Carpenter,* sturdy and seasoned as the timbers they described, is now added Mr. Benfield's short but sound history of Purbeck Isle, its marble, and the men who quarried it. Purbeck stone, less famous than Portland but, with subtle differences, very closely resembling it, is no longer quarried on a large scale; the Victorians for some reason regarded it with prejudice, and what Professor A. E. Richardson calls in his introduction "architects (who) can produce new fashions like conjurers out of a bag" appear to have little use for it. Westminster Abbey, however, contains Purbeck; Salisbury, Exeter, Chichester and Winchester all contain "examples of its delicate workings"; it graces the Galilee Porch at Ely; from the thirteenth to the middle fourteenth century it added distinction to many aspects of interior ecclesiastical architecture. Since then Portland has for general use superseded Purbeck; yet "there is more 'Portland' stone in Purbeck than in Portland itself," Mr. Benfield says. "Bed for bed the seams are the same, and side by side in a building only an expert could tell one from the other, but for some reason stone that is dug in Portland is far kinder to work." Out of this slight unkindliness of character, the tendency for the stone to bruise under the careless chisel, have arisen prejudices that the present age of concrete and architectural sloppiness has only deepened. The results are the silent quarries on Purbeck Isle and the empty quays of Swanage Bay.

All histories of dying or forgotten crafts have about them a touch of sadness, and it is very true of Mr. Benfield's book. Behind Purbeck stone stands what is left of a race of Purbeck men: craftsmen of splendid independence who sang at their work, who had their own Stoneworkers Company, with sternly guarded traditions and privileges, meetings for the hammering out of disputes and an annual beer-and-skittles each Shrove Tuesday at the town hall of Corfe Castle. It is a hard and significant commentary on our time that these men now live by quarrying stone not for cathedral interiors or the staircases of public buildings or even for the gutters of by-passes, but for ornamental bird-baths sold on a basis of a shilling an inch. These men, as much as the stone itself, form the backbone of Mr. Benfield's excellent little book, and "the world," as he remarks, "will be the loser when the Purbeck quarryman no longer stands in a direct line with those first men who won their Charter."

H. E. BATES.