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NEW FICTION

The Touching Life of An Indian B.A.

By H. E. BATES

The Bachelor of Arts. By R. K. Narayan. (Nelson. 7s. 6d.)

Felicity Greens. By John Brophy. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

Ninepenny Flute. By A. E. Coppard. (Macmillan. 7s. 6d.)

The Blind for Sacrifice. By John Owen. (Macmillan. 7s. 6d.)

Mr. Graham Greene is not a critic who gives away bouquets with, so to speak, pounds of tea. Consequently his championship of "THE BACHELOR OF ARTS," to which he has contributed an excellent preface, is impressive. This novel by a young Indian has done something for Mr. Greene, as it has now done for me, which no other novelist of India—and that goes for all the famous names as far as I am concerned—has ever done. It is a novel of beautiful objectivity, wonderfully mature, written in a style that has in it an odd, very faint reminiscence of melancholy.

Here, says Mr. Greene, "we are aware not of an individual author, with views on politics or social reform, or with a personal mysticism to express, but of a whole national condition: the huge Indian space into which friends disappear to take up railway clerkships and never to write letters. . . Perhaps it is no coincidence that Mr. Narayan's light, vivid style, with its sense of time passing, of the unrealised beauty of human relationships, so often recalls Tchekov."

One for All
This is very true, Chandran, the young Indian student, subsequently Bachelor of Arts, is perfectly individual, yet he stands, as so many of Tchekov's characters stood, for the expression of a whole generation. His life has that same futility, touched nevertheless by humour, that we see so often in the lives of Tchekov's folk. For four years this youth studies at the University of Malgudi, is a keen debater, listens to lectures on political science, Shakespeare, Milton, modern literature, works himself almost ill for that coveted symbol of learning, his B.A., and in the end—what? He can get nothing better for himself than the sales agency of a local newspaper. His emotional self is dissipated in the huge waste of caste prejudice. When he falls in love his mother is horrified. The girl is middle-aged—nearly sixteen! It will never do. She, the mother, will never be able to lift her head in public again. Then the horoscopes of the young girl and Chandran do not match. ("This is not a matter in which we can take risks. It is a question of life and death to the girl. Mars has never been known to spare. He kills.") The girl is not for him, she wanders as a sanyasi for eight months, returns home, takes up his agency, is married at last to another girl. Barely stated, there seems nothing in it. Yet Mr. Narayan's rendering of human relationships has a perfection of phrasing and a depth of understanding that make Chandran's life very real and, especially in those passages relating to his love for the two young girls, beautifully touching, and, as Mr. Greene says, the humour of the book enchants. For me, at any rate, there has been no better novel this year.

Satire and Success
Satire seems to be enjoying a boom, and Mr. Brophy is the latest speculator in the market. He is well fitted for the job, and in "Felicity Greens" has really taken a holiday to give us a nice tongue-in-the-cheek novel which he calls "the story of a success." He should have called it, perhaps, "FELICITY GREENE OR HOW TO MAKE WRITING PAY," for this is the story of that type of woman novelist who, while climbing the ladder, never forgets the B.F. and the kudos and, above all, never forgets herself. Having suffered, with Mr. Brophy, at the hands (and voice) of this special brand of literary personality, I can testify that Mr. Brophy is not, like many satirists, beating a dead donkey. Felicity is alive all right, and there is great fun in Mr. Brophy's brief but sly running commentary on her "brilliant" career.

In "NINEPENNY FLUTE" Mr. Coppard gives us his best volume of tales since "The Field of Mustard." Since that book, the graph of his achievement has shown a sharp and, for me, most depressing decline; for I have, at one time and another, worn out almost as many pairs of trouser knees in worship of Mr. Coppard as Mr. Coppard has worn out in worship of Henry James. My one grudge against Mr. Coppard has always been that he never gave us enough pure Coppard. Mr. Jones, like an awful cheerfulness, would keep on breaking in. It was always beyond me that the author of "Dusky Ruth," "Clorinda Walks in Heaven," "The Field of Mustard" and "The Higglers" should have felt it necessary to spend so many years of artistic genuflection at the Jamesian altar. Happily, in "Ninepenny Flute" Mr. Coppard seems to have got up to stretch his legs. I admire here especially the title story, but the whole book is Tracy, free, typical of that peculiar conventional style of humour and oddity which is Mr. Coppard's own and which, strangely enough, no one has ever copied. His fantasy is still his least happy mood, and I am not sure that his imitations of Hans Andersen are much better. For the rest, this book goes to join that long, solid Coppardian row which is the achievement of one of the most individual short story writers of our time.

About Blindness
It would be possible, but not fair, to review "THE BLIND FOR SACRIFICE" in one word. NO. For, to my mind, this book will not do at all. It is a rule of criticism never to quarrel with an author's theme; only, if necessary, with his handling of it; but of all themes I feel that blindness should have been left alone by Mr. Owen. This is the story, set on a Suffolk farm, of the love of a middle-aged woman for a young man who is blind. Mr. Owen writes: "Why was the world from sky to earth magical? What was there in wind and sea that seemed joined to herself, so that she WAS wind and the wind was she? Why did she find herself upon the crest of those seas below?" Rude echo answers—so what? Critical echo must answer that tragedy plus sentimentalism plus rhetoric too often equals ludicrousness, and leave it at that.

BEAVERS
For children and, indeed, for everyone who likes a tale of wild animals based on sound observation and thorough knowledge, "BEAVERS, FOXGLOWS by Wendell and Lucie Chapman (Putnam 7s. 6d.) is the broth of a book. Mr. and Mrs. Chapman have studied and photographed beavers in the Rocky Mountains and they tell the tale of how Notchtail and Blackface found their pond, and sner built their lodge, and reared their kittens, with admirable vividness and skill. The photos are good and the book ends with a plea for preservation of this most fascinating of the world's civil engineers.

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