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NEW FICTION

Another Delightful Novel from India

By H. E. BATES

- Phulmat of the Hills. By Verrier Elwin. (Murray, 7s. 6d.)
- Intimate Strangers. By Katharine Susannah Prichard. (Cape, 7s. 6d.)
- A Bridge to Divide Them. By Coronwy Rees. (Faber and Faber, 7s. 6d.)
- The Earliest Dreams. By Nancy Hale. (Lovat Dickson, 7s. 6d.)

Recently we were given a remarkable novel of Indian life by an Indian, Mr. C. K. Narayan, called "The Bachelor of Arts"; now we are offered another, almost as good, and certainly having the ingredients of a greater popularity, by Mr. Verrier Elwin. But if this is also a novel of Indian life, it is of a life as remote from the life of Mr. Narayan's student as that life was in turn remote from the Anglo-Indian social life of Poona or Bombay. It is, in fact, utterly remote from all accepted (i.e., fashionable, established, familiar, &c.) spheres of Indian life of to-day or yesterday. Mr. Verrier's people are a primitive and remote tribe living in the forest uplands of the Malkal Hills—the Gond's—and they move against a background of strange witchcraft, primitive custom, and wild life that make this book a piece of the best kind of romance, rich in emotion but unselfish, rich in colour but firmly rooted in fact, a romance that is also realistic and as frank in its portrayal of love, as Maupassant.

To Die by the Snake

Mr. Verrier's heroine is a Gond girl: Phulmat. She is extremely beautiful ("a girl of furious gold, aloof yet insatiable; alluring and yet in some strange way uplifting") and is in love with Gamira, who, according to the prophecy of a tribal festival, is to die "by the snake" within a year. But during that year other things happen: Gamira falls a victim to another girl, Adri, and Phulmat herself falls a victim to leprosy. The poignancy of such a situation, the whole central situation of the book, is very great and, for the novelist, very dangerous. It is as full of pitfalls as Gond life itself is full of superstitions, and in the hands of a lesser writer it might have degenerated into pure mush. But by a carefully regulated combination of simplicity, humour, and tenderness, and above all, a most beautiful frankness, Mr. Verrier keeps the book where it belongs: on the plane of true realistic romance.

Above all, he keeps it true to the traditions of the people he is describing; he sees that the love he describes is really love, frank, sensual, free, as the Gonds know it, and not as it is in the world of Europe and Hollywood. All the time, indeed, he keeps your hand firmly on the pulse of this obscure and remarkably fascinating people, whom he knows from the experience of years, and thus gives us a book which is genuine in all aspects of fact and imagination.

Why Are There So Few Australian Novels?

"INTIMATE STRANGERS" is a novel from and about a country which has, for some obscure reason, produced scarcely any indigenous literature of consequence at all. What are Australian novelists doing not to take advantage, as Americans have done, of the vast untapped sources of the life of their own continent? It is only in the last ten years that Americans have seen the folly of looking towards Europe for inspiration. A similar revolution is long overdue in the Antipodes. It is, therefore, a disappointment to find Miss Katherine Susannah Prichard, after novels of native Australian life like "Coomadoo" and "Haxby's Circus," modelling a novel on the flabby, gossipy pattern of any English lady magazine novelist. "Intimate Strangers" might just as easily have been written about Worthing or Weston-super-Mare as about the small Australian seaside town in which Elodie and Greg, long enough married to have grown children, find themselves intimate strangers because of new loves. It tells us nothing new about Australian life in particular, and not much about human conflicts in general. It is a competent, readable so-so sort of book, that would have serialised beautifully in one of those periodicals whose print is so cunningly distributed among finger and baked beans, but it is not worthy of the Miss Prichard we we read know.

Ambition Instead of Gloom

"A BRIDGE TO DIVIDE THEM" is another novel about Wales. In almost any novel about Wales you may be sure of finding roughly equal quantities of sex (in Wales sex would seem to have something of the quality of bad cheese), religion, gloom, and pettiness. In "A Bridge to Divide Them" we get something extra to this now depressing fictional recipe: ambition. A great bridge to span the estuary between two seaside towns begins by being the vision of the public-spirited Harcourt, goes on to become an obsession, and blossoms into a symbol of the man's own power. In tracing the growth of its rise, Mr. Rees also traces the lives of two families, one upper and one lower class, contrasting and comparing them, subtly crossing them, giving us a full but never over-crowded record of their lives.

He writes good, honest workman-like prose, and though he insists, like almost all Welsh novelists, in laying almost every love-scene in the bracken on the mountains in the usual Laurentian darkness, his novel is not derivative, but exists honestly by itself, giving promise of still better things to come.

"THE EARLIEST DREAMS" is a collection of short stories from America. It is customary, nowadays, to hand out indiscriminate laurels to almost anyone who offers us stories from that continent. The kicks are reserved for our own exponents of the art. Here the situation must be reversed. Miss Hale's stories are like small portmanteaux stuffed to overflow with scores of necessary and unnecessary garments. The trouble is that Miss Hale, like so many women and so many writers, cannot decide what to take and what to leave behind. So she stuffs everything in and sits on the trunk and hopes for the best. All this, though well-intentioned, results in an over-lush emotional and adjectival mess. But at least you learn one lesson from Miss Hale, that it is better for the short story writer to travel lightly, or not to travel at all.

Popular, rather than popular and scientific, Mr. Lewis Spence's "LEGENDARY LONDON" (Hale, 12s. 6d.) is, all the same, rather an entertaining curious book. Its two parts discuss London in history and London in legend, London before and under and after the Romans, and London of Brute, and King Lud and Gog and Magog and King Arthur and Modred.



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