

FICTION

SENSE AND SENSUALITY by Sarah Salt
(PAYSON & CLARKE. \$2.50)

MISS SALT displayed a quite remarkable talent in her short stories, *A Tiny Seed of Love*, published a few months ago, and this talent is already fully equal to a long flight, for her first novel is a sustained, deftly-done story of contemporary married life in certain intellectual circles, where the talk of freedom in sex matters for both men and women sometimes leads people into most unfortunate situations. In fact, Miss Salt's novel might be regarded as a sermon against such idle chatter, so much of which runs directly counter to sound human instinct.

It is not fair to so excellent a novel as *Sense and Sensuality* to label it a sermon almost at the outset of a review. But there are sermons and sermons and if ministers were a tenth as skilful in handling the problems of everyday life under existing social conditions as is Miss Salt there is little doubt that the churches would be better filled. A male reviewer ought to blush a little in daring to praise what seems to be Miss Salt's insight into feminine psychology, but there is a rightness, a clear-headed, cool intelligence about her thinking that emboldens one to believe she has made no mistakes even in this difficult field.

Sense and Sensuality is mostly concerned with the lives of a rising young publisher and his wife. When we meet Richard and Laura they already have one child, Prudence, and the ingredients are present for the making of a happy home. They move in sophisticated circles—among authors, you know, and other advanced thinkers. Laura, like a good many other modern young women without

very much to do, suffers an attack of boredom, largely because Richard is too busy to be the companion he might have been, and while in this state of mind she finds that Richard is putting into practice some of the rules for the conduct of life that are so popular in their set, at least in conversation. There is, one suspects, the usual mixture of motives for Laura's revenge, but revenge herself she does, by having an affair with a young man who is greatly annoyed by his affairs with women, but who cannot resist them.

While all this is going on, other characters are conducting similar experiments, none of them with any very strikingly successful results so far as happiness is concerned. And interspersed between the chapters relating directly to the progress of the story are letters from Prudence's nurse to a friend of hers, which serve as a sort of Greek chorus to the drama, and which are themselves priceless in the skill with which they are made to depict their writer.

The outcome of the revenge of Laura upon Richard is Miss Salt's affair, although there have been suggestions that neither emerges any happier from the go at sexual freedom. What has been said may tend to make the book appear only a little more cheerful than a meeting of a Russian suicide society on a rainy Sunday afternoon, and this, if true, is wholly wrong, for Miss Salt writes sharply and brightly without any attempts at smartness, and there is a depth of feeling in the book, a thorough understanding of the characters, together with a deep and genuine sympathy that arouses compassion and leaves the reader moved both by the story and the skill of its telling.

Miss Salt's style is new and fresh and there

is originality in the construction of her novel. These admirable qualities, along with many others, make it a book which demands attention. Women will certainly like it; and men, it is probable, will find it profitable reading.

THE VIRTUE OF THIS JEST by *James Stuart Montgomery* (GREENBERG. \$2.50)

THIS is by no means an altogether dull book, but the pattern is familiar throughout; there is a tendency on the part of the author to moralize—a fault which we are still able to forgive in the older novelists, but which grows irritating in the younger ones; and the ending, wherein the raffish poet who is the hero makes his escape from Newgate prison, is inexcusably trite. Better to have allowed the rascal to swing on Tyburn than to have had him break jail in so conventional a fashion. One's fondness for him is not so great as to demand a happy ending.

Mr. Montgomery has quite evidently made a careful study of the slang dictionaries of the Eighteenth Century, as the book abounds in thieves' cant, and so heavily are many of the pages sprinkled with unintelligible expressions that a number of footnotes are necessary. There are times when one feels that the author is merely airing his knowledge of the low language of the times, and the story itself is lost in a swirl of linguistic arabesques.

In form *The Virtue of This Jest* is cast in the familiar biographical mold—that is to say, it begins with the birth of the precious scoundrel Nicholas, the son of a mother not at all annoyed by moral considerations, and ends with what should have been his death. The adventures of our Nicky hang but loosely together; he finds a loyal wench—loyal, that is, in her own generous fashion—and they take to the road for a time with a travelling show. Chance tosses them up against Archie Gordon of Glenbucket, a supporter of Charles Stuart, who is on the verge of his invasion of England.

Shifting the scene back to London, Mr. Montgomery introduces us to the lukewarm followers of the Bonny Prince and lets us watch the ingenious Nicky rally the ragtag and bobtail of London into a queer army, designed to support the Young Pretender when he and his Highlanders enter the capital. Nicky conjures up a great monarch of all crooks and beggars called Cock Lorrel, and centers the anti-Hanover revolt about him. But Charles Stuart turns back when victory is in his grasp, and a catchpole lays violent hands upon our hero, charging him with treason and landing him in Newgate.

Just why Mr. Montgomery's novel does not seem better than it does is not altogether easy to say, although some of its handicaps have been set forth already. It is, perhaps, too patently synthetic or it may be that the author intends to spoof his characters and his readers a bit. At any rate, it is about as unsatisfactory a substitute for the genuine thing in picaresque novels—and even the best of the type seem to be very little read just now—as a glass of near-beer would be for the sort of ale that was drunk from leathern jacks in the days when Nicky was supposed to have flourished in London.

INVITATION TO DANGER by *Alfred Stanford* (MORROW. \$2.50)

MR. STANFORD has followed his excellent first book, *Navigator*, the material for which he discovered in the rich nautical history of New England, with another from the same source that is no less colorful and interesting. The first book centered about the character of Nathaniel Bowditch, without whose contributions to navigation, so the experts tell us, there might never have been those glorious creations, American clippers. The new book has for its hero another seafaring man, Daniel Bover, the son of a ship's captain, who took to the sea as naturally as a gull.

His father left him with a curious heritage, a passion for ships and a passion for danger.