

Faith Faces Unfaithfulness

THE CIRCLE OF THE DAY. By Helen Howe. New York: Simon & Schuster. 262 pp. \$3.

By ELIZABETH JANEWAY

THERE will be some whom "The Circle of the Day" will affect like caramel in the back teeth, but there will be twenty times as many who won't be able to put it down. The action is encompassed by morning-to-evening of Faith Millet's tenth wedding anniversary. Faith is a fashionable young matron with a successful husband, one daughter, a pleasant apartment on Fifty-seventh Street, reliable help, and a slim figure. She awakes to a day which promises to vary from her routine only by a bit more pleasant activity than usual. Her daughter is, perhaps, rather highly strung, her own life less meaningful than she would like to have it, but on the whole she sees herself as the happy child of good fortune. Then a telephone call shatters the picture. What was Faith's husband, Eric, doing in Gramercy Park playing with a little boy who resembles him mightily? Does not his old light-o'-love, Cherry, live near there? Is it his son, the son

Faith has not been able to bear him? Is it? Is it? Of course it is. Eric admits it.

But he loves Faith. The little boy, the meeting with Cherry four years before, had been the products of chance. He had seen Cherry in London during the war when he was lonesome, when the bombs were flying, when the certainty of a tomorrow had somewhat faded. He had not known about the child until Cherry's recent arrival in New York. Will not Faith forgive him?

So she goes out searching for a solution to her problem. At the hairdresser's a friend (who must obviously be played by Ilka Chase) advises her to hang on to her husband no matter what. He is well-to-do and socially Faith will be a bore without him. In Grand Central Station, spending an hour between trains with an old friend, Faith hears the opposite. Faith, says the companion of her youth, must not compromise. Let her find again her first love, the dashing Freddy just now returned to New York from Indo-China and other romantic spots.

Thesis, anti-thesis. Now comes an opportunity for Faith to behave badly

because she is muddled and for Miss Howe's mirror to reflect the political world. At a luncheon at her club Faith refuses to fight against what she does not believe because of a foolish perfectionist idealism. Perhaps this is her low point, though Miss Howe does better here than in the more usual earlier scenes. The club women and speakers are described with some of that wit and perception which the reader has heretofore been expecting from the author in vain. But, alas, Miss Howe cannot let them perform as long as we would like. She crams them back into her bag and turns to pathos.

Faith's deterioration having occupied the morning, her regeneration now takes place throughout the afternoon. Meeting with Freddy, who broke her heart twelve years before, it is a glamorous moment for Faith, with Freddy urging her to fly with him to Paris. But while she has matured Freddy has not. He is unstable and irresponsible and Faith finds, over champagne, that she does not love him any longer. Exit Freddy. Enter Faith's mother-in-law, an old lady dying alone, unloved even by the good son and daughter-in-law, who act toward her with careful devotion. It seems she has turned away from love herself, frozen within herself by her husband's death, refusing to give to others. She is Faith's horrible example.

The day is drawing to a close. Faith must go home to her decision and her fate. But first she makes a pilgrimage to Gramercy Park to see the little boy. He is there (if this were happening to you or me he would have been home with German measles) and he is charming. Faith's heart warms to him in spite of herself. Now there remains only the trip home, and on the way Faith witnesses an accident and is reminded of the brevity of life. And at home there is Eric, reading aloud to the little girl. Why, he must have suffered too, thinks Faith; I love him!

Well, now, it's not as silly as it sounds because it is done adroitly. Miss Howe gets over several of her coincidences neatly, her observations on aspects of life in New York among the well-to-do are deft and amusing. But Miss Howe has used it largely to defeat herself. By confining her action to one day, Faith must Learn Something from everyone and everything, and learn it at once; there is no time for her to cogitate, to be mistaken, to experience revelation. And so there is no room for life itself. Miss Howe has controlled her work too completely, she has allowed no give-and-take between creator and creature. As a result her book is sterile.

Possessor's Pity

By George Abbe

THE OWNER of this city has been more than kind,
And tender in his wishes for us all.
I saw him pasting bank notes on the blind,
Hiding the dead-from-hunger behind a wall.

I saw a street car with bumpers of velour
Run over frightened people most considerably:
The bones broke softly, and a velvet sewer
Received the bodies—buried without fee.

I saw the needy naked in department stores
Placed in a bronze globe dewy with perfume
Which whirled them with subdued and pleasant roar
Till they forgot their need of board and room.

I saw the starving sorrowed-for and loved
By a long procession of the richly clad
Who touched thin, dying bodies with their gloves,
Asked for a priest, slowly removed their hats.

The factory owner, compassionate and able,
Saw that the hand torn by the new machine
Was wrapped in linen napkins from his table,
A note sent to the workman's wife who grieved.

The owner of these owners, wherever he was,
Could not be seen, but he was more than good:
On the prone body of each unemployed
He placed a vase of flowers to serve as food.

Boer Trek

WILD CONQUEST. By Peter Abrahams. New York: Harper & Bros. 309 pp. \$3.

By CHRISTINE NOBLE GOVAN

THE CONQUEST of every wilderness has tremendous similarities. The conquest of the African Southern territory by the Dutch had much of the terror, the color, and the pageantry of the white man's invasion of North America.

Mr. Abrahams has the distinct advantage of having lived for years in the Boer country. Few—if any—critics here can argue with him as to authenticity of his detail and none will wish to regarding the beauty of his writing.

In "Wild Conquest" he tells the story of a small, detached group of landowners whose slaves are freed by an edict which threatens the lives of all whites in the territory. Kasper Jansen, his wife, Anna, his small son, and his brother, Koos, are saved from annihilation by the dignity and justice of an ancient African.

They set out to join the other Boers in the trek to a fairer—and safer—land, a journey fraught with incessant danger, with tremendous hardships, and with heroic action. To this reviewer the author's picture of these courageous if misguided people was more absorbing than that of the almost hysterical, melodramatic natives.



Peter Abrahams—"the story of what we call progress."

The story of the Boers is the story of Anna, who sees her once-tender husband hardened by the savagery which such a life develops. It is the story of Koos, lustful, lawless, and stupid, who revels in brutality. It is the story, too, of gentle Paul, who broods over man's nature and what killing so recklessly will do to it. It is, above all, the story of what we call progress and of the men and women sacrificed to it.

A larger portion of the book is given to the natives, their loving, their war talk, their superstitions and customs.

With Moshesh, king of the Basutos, one agrees that there is too much chest-throwing and eloquence among all the spokesmen of the tribes. Perhaps African natives do speak in this dramatic manner, but pages of it make hard going for the modern reader. Sometimes Mr. Abrahams's natives sound like old Vikings, sometimes like the great speechmakers among the American Indians. Again one catches a flavor of what might have been the speech of the Elizabethan explorers. This probably adds a sense of universality and color to the narrative, but one wearies at times with the constant concern with sex and war couched in such flamboyant terms.

Mr. Abrahams is a sensitive writer. He has a deep sympathy for the sufferings of universal man and a great tenderness towards their aims and their hopes, no matter how foolish they may be. His storytelling ability is unquestioned and the haunting quality of his style bespeaks rare talent.

"Wild Conquest" is a thrilling story, as any good saga of conquest should be. Its well-drawn characters and its exotic setting alone would make it entertaining, but Peter Abrahams's feeling for the tremendous and more delicate nuances of human emotion make it a novel of lasting quality.

Malayan Death March

THE LEGACY. By Nevil Shute. New York: William Morrow & Co. 308 pp. \$3.

By KATHLEEN SPROUL

THE MOST thrilling stories of human magnificence are often those enforced on quiet protagonists who never intended to be heroes. That Nevil Shute should encounter such a tale in Sumatra promised well. His former books have marked him a direct-line descendant from those elite among the ancient wandering minstrels who could, from a first quiet sentence, implant irresistible urge to hear a tale.

In its beginning "The Legacy" carries this authority; unfortunately, before the end tale-spinning magic is not enough. For here has been attempted a hybrid creation and the two elements fall apart from an unseemly mid-point divide. The inspiring episode, transplanted from Sumatra to Malaya, is a truly great story, to which by slow, unaccented documentation, Mr. Shute has contributed almost unbearable poignancy and tension. But his own undiluted invention taking over later seems in contrast painfully contrived.

Jean Paget is an unexceptional, pleasant-mannered British girl, working as a typist in Malaya when the Japanese arrive. She delays her own evacuation a fatal few hours to help friends in a neighboring village. That gesture of loyalty precipitates her into a death march of women and children, which lasted for incredible months and nightmare hundreds of miles, as one Japanese officer after another refused responsibility for the group.

Half of the marchers die as the inexorable rhythm of survival of fittest asserts itself and at last their remaining Japanese guard dies, himself bewildered. Jean, accepted leader, wins consent from a Malayan headman for the party to settle in his village and work the neglected paddy fields. Here they find kindness and security until war's end.

The story is told by the elderly solicitor who handles the legacy Jean receives after her return to England. Even with that point-of-view device stretched far too thin, the merciless odyssey is gripping. But Jean herself moves only within the terrible urgency of the tale. She is never really alive on her own because we gain only an unrevealing minimum of her thinking and feeling.

Toward the end of the march the party meets an Australian prisoner (Continued on page 26)

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 365

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 365 will be found in the next issue.

LA BCN EMLOF EMGE

EC HPCR G DSGPK

LQ EC GTZNLPS

RLQKCW, G HCGE LQ

GE COTS G TCWXYSES

XYGEC. —YNTLGO.

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 364
Punishment of a miser—to pay
the drafts of his heir in his tomb.
—HAWTHORNE.