

FICTION

(Continued from page 18)

of the jungle, the minute, patient, untiring observation and understanding of its crashing violence and its delicacy. Not even Rudyard Kipling gives us more beauty or more unforgettableness. Her sentences with their burden of men and leaves and animals and sun and woodsmoke and birdsong intermingled, as if they were some medieval tapestry, are to be read and savored and remembered long after we have forgotten the names and the drama of the people through whose moods she has made us feel it. "For the greater part of the journey," she writes, the elephants "moved silently, passing like shadows among other shadows." That is her magic.

Abasuerus with Sex

SO GREAT A QUEEN. By Paul Frischauer. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 356 pp. \$3.

By BRADFORD SMITH

AT LAST two popular arts have been united—the historical romance and the strip tease. In his story of ancient Persia, drawn from the Biblical Book of Esther, Mr. Frischauer has gone straight to Gypsy Rose Lee for his dramatic effects. Will Vasthi, Queen of Queens and the world's most beautiful woman, take off her clothes before the reveling princes at the command of the King of Kings? Will the maidens of the harem pass the test for virginity? Will the king succumb to Esther in the course of helping her remove her river-shrunken dress? Mr. Frischauer builds up to one sexual climax after another—and then ducks out.

In the lavish, pleasure-loving court of Ahasuerus there is no doubt some justification for such an approach, and Mr. Frischauer makes the most of it. He does an effective job of making that ancient court seem real and immediate, and he writes of the wines, the robes, the gardens, the temple, and the court officials and customs as if he had seen them all himself.

Chief theme of the book is the persecution of the Jews by a "Popular Front" led by a political schemer named Haman, who hopes to make himself King of Kings through the persecution of a minority. By referring to the Jews as the fair-skinned people Mr. Frischauer presents an instructive analogy with racial prejudice in our own times.

After losing Vasthi by his foolish insistence on exposing her naked



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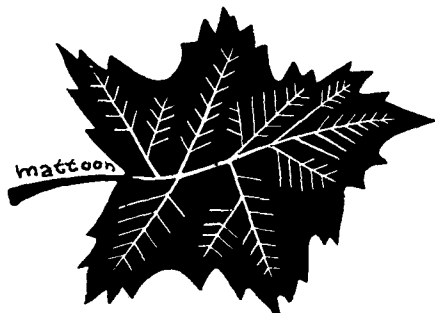
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before his friends, the King of Kings has to look about for another queen. Luck and circumstances fix the choice on Esther, a Jewess. After deciding that her duty to her people demands this sacrifice of her, Esther falls in love with the king and becomes as interested in saving him from his enemies as in saving her people from annihilation. Since Haman is conspiring both at home and abroad to take the king's place, her two aims become one. Her people must help save the king from Haman, and in doing so will save themselves. Guided by her Uncle Mordecai, she circumvents the palace plots for her own downfall, saving her beloved king, her marriage, and her people. In winding up the story Mr. Frischauer prefers to ignore the ending as told in the Book of Esther, in which the Jews smote all their enemies "and did what they would unto those that hated them," slaying more than 75,000.

Mr. Frischauer's portraits of the main characters are effective. Haman the rabble rouser, Mordecai with his faith in an unseen God, Ahasuerus indulging himself with the prerogatives due to kings—these are convincing and memorable. Esther is less so, perhaps because we lose sight of her in the second half of the book, where the story bogs down as Mr. Frischauer describes the involvement of the neighboring nations in the conspiracy against the King of Kings. That the end of the book also falters may be because of Mr. Frischauer's efforts to avoid the one provided by the Bible.

Though Mr. Frischauer manages to avoid defeat for King Ahasuerus, he himself is vanquished by the little word lay ("The king watched her lay down on her side") on page 137, only to take another licking at the same hands on page 183 (The Queen's gown "laid so lightly on her skin that Esther scarcely felt herself to be dressed at all").

Still, "So Great a Queen" is a very likely candidate as a successor to Samson and Delilah on the screen. It has spectacle, sex, war, love triangles, and plenty of villains. It even has a theme applicable to the present that is simple enough for Hollywood to present. Read it now and do your own casting!



Stumbling, Groping, Pitiable People

THE GRASS IS SINGING. By Doris Lessing. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 245 pp. \$3.

By CHRISTINE NOBLE GOVAN

WHEN, on the veranda of her farmhouse in South Africa, Mary Turner was found murdered, the neighbors were not too surprised. In fact, under their fear of what this might mean to the rest of them, a minority, they felt a certain satisfaction. It was as if they had known all along that something dreadful must happen to a woman like her who shunned her neighbors, had a flaring temper, and did not know how to control the natives.

It was not in any of them—even the young man from England who had come too late to relieve her—to go back and unravel the dark, drab threads of her dark, drab background or that of her unfortunate husband. Yet those threads, as so carefully sought out by the writer, were drawn into the inexorable web that caught Mary Turner on her veranda that sweltering morning. They led to the man who had driven her to desperation, to the man who had brutally killed her, even to the dogs who furtively licked at the watery pool of blood in which she lay.

Mary Turner's childhood had been monotonous to the point of torture. She was born and raised in a barren, uncouth South African town. Diversion was supplied by her father's incessant drunkenness and by her mother's defeated complaints and terror of her husband. The symbol of their misery was "The Store," where Mary's father bought his liquor and her humiliated mother begged for more time on the unpaid bills.

When Mary broke away from this life she had, to an intensified degree, that fervent determination, to keep away from it, to make something of herself, that so many girls have felt the world over. Because her background had been so abject this feeling was intensified to fanaticism. She worked hard, made a life for herself, and was on what she considered a definitely upward grade when a chance, overheard remark deflated her to a tragic degree.

These few careless words sent Mary in search of a husband and, as fate would have it, she met up with Richard Turner at a time when life on his unsuccessful farm, loneliness, and discouragement had become more than he could bear. Seeing her a successful woman and picturing her more so than she was, he married her. The

threads of the web began to close on them.

The longest part of the book is a masterly job of making a life of deadly monotony absorbing to the reader. Mary, almost immediately disillusioned, sees in Richard's weaknesses, his ever-failing projects, and his demands on her, which she finds repellent, all the contours and lineaments of her parents' tragedy. When he opens a store, doomed to failure from the first, Mary knows the ultimate despair.

The fate of these two people, stumbling and groping through life, has universal duplications, so that their story with slight variations is the story of stumbling, groping, pitiable people everywhere. What ennobles it is Miss Lessing's compassion, which lends it an air of tremendous dignity and tragedy. One feels that in an era less choked with literary cream it would have become a classic picture of man's struggle against ruthless fate. The words fall softly like snowflakes or feathers until at last, as in a nightmare, the reader is smothered with the horror of what the words have said.

Fiction Notes

EPISODE IN PALMETTO, by Erskine Caldwell. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$2.75. Vernona Stevens, twenty-two, with "distinctive breasts" and a liking for "prolonged and passionate love-making," was a schoolteacher at Palmetto (pop. 548) in some Southern state, but she was cut out to be a successful prostitute. Erskine Caldwell devotes the 252 pages of this semi-smutty novel to voluptuous Vernona's trial run as a bush league Amber. Not since the sub rosa stuff of my college days have I read so shameless a piece of literary pandering.

The melodrama covers two weeks' time—the total of Vernona's teaching career. We find her in a tight-fitting sweater that wows the boys and a few pages later she is kissing one of the more wowed of them after school. He reacts violently and she has a heck of a time shooing him away.

Comes Sunday and she goes to church and there (hiss! hiss!) she is eyed by big, handsome political-big-shot Milledge (honest!) Mangrum. She spends the afternoon on her bed mooning about Milledge and along about sundown he comes calling. They light out for the edge of town and he parks on the first side road. The inevitable happens.

Well, sir, things drone along for maybe a day and then the county