

Plains of China

THE BIG CHARIOT. By Charmian Clift and George Johnston. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 342 pp. \$3.75.

By RAYMOND HOLDEN

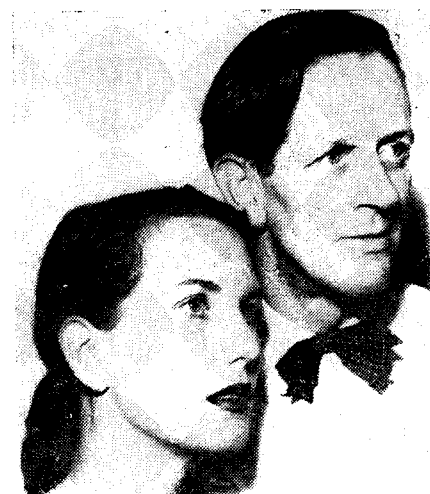
THERE is, presumably, no hard and fast rule covering the degree to which a historical novel must be historical. If it is a good novel, only the most carping critic will call attention to liberties taken with time, place, and person. The authors of "The Big Chariot" have written a good and interesting, even a moving, novel and if a student of Chinese history would occasionally raise his eyebrows the reader need not trouble to do so. For in addition to telling a stirring and tragic story, the authors have a point to make and they have made it well.

It is the old story of a family parted by civil war, civil war which in China has not been a single disastrous crisis but, for hundreds of years, a prevailing condition. Yuan and Wei were sons of Cheng Li-jen, a nobleman high in the court of the last authentic Ming emperor, Yuan a poet and dreamer and Wei an ardent and brilliant young soldier. Although the glories of the Ming had long since faded into corruption, the tradition of China's greatness was strong in both Yuan and Wei—in Yuan as an ideal of loyalty, in Wei as an itch for activity. When Peking fell to the peasant General Li, Wei joined the force which drove north to ask the help of the Manchus in retaking the city, not understanding at first that his superiors were selling out to the

northerners. Yuan, at his father's bidding, took the girl Mai Meng and her mother under his care and headed south and west for safety, thereby aligning himself with the remnants of the fleeing Ming court, helping to keep it and its tradition alive in a China turned hostile to it. Wei, the opportunist, supported the Manchu tide and devoted his sword to its spread, which was inevitably southward.

The authors have used this family tragedy as the point of light with which to illuminate a screen, colored with battle and bloodshed, brutality and suffering, upon which the picture of China's division in the seventeenth century between idealism and opportunism is portrayed. It appears to be the feeling of the authors that this struggle is analagous to that which is going on in China today, and the suggestion is that since China recovered her greatness after the Manchu invasion she will do so again. This point may seem a somewhat doubtful one to those who are not quite willing to admit the likeness between the Manchus and the Communists of today. Yet this misgiving cannot overshadow the poignance and real beauty of the story of Yuan's wanderings, his joys and sorrows, his courage in the face of hopelessness, his willingness to live for the beliefs for which he was also willing to die.

This is not a happy tale, as China is not a happy country, but it is human and heartening nonetheless. Even though it may surprise some and confuse others in its portrayal of Chinese history, it will give to many a reader who would not touch history with a ten-foot pole a vivid sense of the character of China as a person, a timeless human being.



Clift and Johnston—"interesting."

Indian Operator

THE FINANCIAL EXPERT. By R. K. Narayan. East Lansing: Michigan State College Press. 178 pp. \$3.

By JOHN FREDERICK MUEHL

ON THE dust jacket of this book a comparison is made between the author and Joyce Cary based simply upon the fact that both writers, while well known in Britain, were for a long time unpublished in America. To the fan and recent re-reader of "Mister Johnson," this comparison may seem strangely tantalizing, for there is much in Mr. Narayan's comedy itself that demands favorable comparison with even the best of Joyce Cary.

"The Financial Expert" is set in India. It is the story of a versatile self-promoter named Margayya, and of the succession of frauds and self-delusions through which he makes his fortune and loses it again. Beginning as an advisor to local farmers Margayya chafes at the indignity of his position, till, after a ritual purification dedicated to the goddess of wealth, he is rewarded by the lucky gift of a pornographic manuscript "Bed Life, or The Science of Marital Happiness" is a miraculous, immediate, and continuing success, supplying Margayya with a handsome living.

By instinct, Margayya finds his way back into banking. By instinct, he makes it enormously successful. And at least partly by instinct, that of self-preservation, he avoids ever noticing the illegality of his methods. Eventually, of course, his world collapses but even then Margayya is not divested of everything. For one thing he still has his instincts intact, and a certain naive optimism in the face of defeat.

And naive is just the word. Throughout the whole story Margayya

On Growing Old

By Harriet Gray Blackwell

Let not belated blooms of fall deceive you
Although the blossoms light a sable wood,
They will not fruit, and sorrow will bereave you
The night frost comes to blacken every bud.
Yet midday cannot stay with one forever
And moonlight has a radiance of its own,
A gleaming silver patina that never
Was burnished in the cauldron of the sun.

Remember that the young tree was not barren
Within the season it was meant to fruit,
And know in winter that the rose of Sharon
Though stripped and bare still has the selfsame root,
And if the song be muted, let no tears
Deny the mellow wisdom of the years.

is untouched by his own dishonesties, for through the simple expedient of naming each vice after a virtue, he is able to maintain a not incredible purity. When, in "The Horse's Mouth," Gulley Jimson pushes Sarah down the stairs and kills her, it is Gulley, not Sarah, whom we pity. And when Markayya defrauds all of the villagers who have trusted him, by the same strange token our sympathies are with him. Mr. Narayan's whole story moves on a fascinating level of individual character so amoral and unreal that when the crude forces of justice and reality enter, they seem a wholly unwarranted, if inevitable, intrusion.

For that matter, that is probably the essence of good comedy, the frustration of our sentimental identification with a character. Certainly the strange sad overtones of "The Financial Expert" stem from our inability either to accept or reject Margayya.

As for Margayya himself, he survives the whole plot. He is not only alive at the end, but in good spirits.

More About Superbudd

THE RETURN OF LANNY BUDD.
By Upton Sinclair. New York: The Viking Press. 555 pp. \$4.

By CHARLES LEE

THAT most charming of supermen, Lanny Budd, is back again. In this eleventh volume of his adventures, proving himself as ubiquitous and indestructible as ever, he visits New York, London, Washington, Berlin, and Hollywood. He sits in President Truman's office, discovers himself in a house built on a solid gold foundation, enjoys a private pipeline into the Politburo's conference room, and fights off death in a Soviet dungeon in East Germany. He meets Dean Acheson, Jan Masaryk, and Ernst Reuter; witnesses the French General Strike and the Berlin Airlift; and is instrumental in founding the Voice of America and the Free University of Berlin.

Summoned out of his busy retirement (he runs a radio program, a weekly newspaper, and a newspaper syndicate in the interests of peace), the ex-Presidential agent is asked by the Treasury Department to track down a band of counterfeiters working somewhere in Europe to dilute the value of American and British currency. His adroit snoopings, always in the guise of an elegant art expert, put him on the trail of a neo-Nazi underground, involve him in a propaganda war with the Russians via the American radio station in Berlin, RIAS, and eventually land him in a Soviet prison (where he is subjected to new kinds of hot and cold warfare in a torture of temperatures). Even Lanny pales when he is told that he is going to be made to confess that he has been master-minding a plot to assassinate Stalin. Nor has life in the meantime been made easier for our harried hero at home: his sister Bess has been arrested as a courier for a Russian spy.

This is a severely compressed account of some of the high spots in Lanny's new adventures. As in the previous books in the series, Mr. Sinclair has stuffed this one as thoroughly as a sandbag. It is full of action and characters, sparkles with literary references, and is so complicated in its plotting that one foreign agent turns out to be "a Social Democrat pretending to be a Nazi pretending to be a Communist." If it is not quite so well integrated as previous Lanny Budd thrillers, if some of its characterizations verge on the absurd (Mr. Truman is ineptly done), if indeed the whole project has got about it something of an adult comic-strip, no matter, it is still a first-rate public service.

Mr. Sinclair's gigantic multi-volume fictionalized history of the past thirty-five years may strike some as a literary freak, the most mammoth political novel in English letters, but

(Continued on page 41)

New Fiction

The titles described below have just been published, but because of limitations of space cannot be reviewed in this issue. In many instances more extended notice will be given in forthcoming numbers.

DREAM IN THE FLESH. By Dan Levin. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$4. The experiences of a liberal who left a government job in Washington and who pursued his ideals fighting with the Marines in the Pacific. Mr. Levin is the author of the well-remembered "Mask of Glory."

FIRST VICE-PRESIDENT. By Joan Transue. New York: Doubleday & Company. \$3. Norman Frume doggedly carves out a career as vice-president of a life insurance company only to discover, at the top of the ladder, that he has not gotten all he might out of life.

FAITHFUL IN MY FASHION. By John Coates. New York: The Macmillan Co. \$3.50. Lesbia, contrary to her name, not only liked men but runs through a string of them in pursuit of her happiness.

THE FORTUNATE MAN. By Frank Tilsley. New York: Julian Messner. \$3.95. A London clerk, by dint of perversance and some lusty bludgeoning, climbs the success-ladder only to learn that the sliding down is easier than the going up.

THE GLORIFICATION OF AL TOULUM. By Robert Arthur. New York: Rinehart & Co. \$3. A satire on the American advertising business.

INVITATION TO FOLLY. By Susan Ertz. New York: Harper & Bros. A tale of marital infidelity set in present-day England recounted by a long-standing, popular author.

THE OLIVE TREE. By Robin Estridge. New York: William Morrow & Co. \$3. Shuttling between Spain and America, Mike Selva learns about his family past and finds himself in a complicated situation as a result.

POST STORIES OF 1952. Edited by Ben Hibbs. New York: Random House. \$3. An assembly of the *Saturday Evening Post* "bests" for the year, featuring such hardy perennials as Kay Boyle, Paul Gallico, and Conrad Richter.

THE REASON FOR ANN. By Myles Connolly. New York: McMullen Books. \$3. Six novelettes, chosen by Mr. Connolly to represent his best work, laid in a variety of realistic settings with religious overtones.

CARRACCI DRAWINGS AT WINDSOR CASTLE. By R. Wittkower. New York: Phaidon Press. \$8.50. Professor Wittkower of the University of London has catalogued the hundreds of drawings by Lodovico, Agostino, and Annibale Carracci who lived during the Baroque period. They are reproduced in handsome plates.

THE RIFLE MAN. By John Brick. New York: Doubleday & Co. \$3.75. Returning to the late eighteenth-century American period of his earlier novels "Troubled Springs" and "The Raid," Mr. Brick sees his hero Tim Murphy through a variety of adventures that include warfare against the Indians.

THE SQUARE TRAP. By Irving Shulman. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$3.75. Life among a group of Mexicans living in the Ravine area of Los Angeles. A social document of delinquency in the same vein as Mr. Shulman's "The Amboy Dukes."

STORY: NUMBER 3. Edited by Whit Burnett and Hallie Burnett. New York: A. A. Wyn. \$3. This anthology of nineteen original short stories features the work of newcomers and old-hands in the fine tradition of the defunct *Story Magazine*.

STORIES OF SUDDEN TRUTH. Edited by Joseph Greene and Elizabeth Abell. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. Clothbound, \$1.50. New York: Ballantine Books. Paperbound, 35¢. Common to the stories in this anthology is the theme of emotional crisis and surprise resolution, the handiwork of such writers as John Hersey, William Saroyan, Erskine Caldwell, Truman Capote, and Eudora Welty.

TENNESSEE HAZARD. By Maristan Chapman. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. \$3.95. Dramatizing a slice of American history, the author details the experiences of Tom Hazard who finds excitement in missions as a Federalist agent.

THESE ITEMS OF DESIRE. By Louis A. Brennan. New York: Random House. \$3.50. Mr. Brennan's first novel concerns itself with the frustrations and rebuffs of Mid, who learns about men and life the hard way.

ZORBA THE GREEK. By Nikos Kazantzakis. New York: Simon & Shuster. \$3.50. Set on the island of Crete, this symbolic novel encompasses the variety of actions and hopes that are within the reach of every man.

—S. M.

