

to kill time prefers the failures who say something to the successes that leave one with a sense of nothing gained. And of course these failures of whom I speak are only partial failures. They write brilliantly at times, have published long passages that are worth "perfectly" composed slighter novels, interest the intelligent reader who knows that failure in one sense or another is the counterpart of trying to say something complex and important—as Jean Morris, in her first and significant and awkward novel, pertinently illustrates.

MISS MORRIS'S theme in "A Man and Two Gods" is as contemporary as the Cold War, as old as the "Oresteia" of Aeschylus. Can one expect more than mercy from men, should one want more than justice from God? In human affairs there is a law for war and a law for peace. They seem to contradict each other and to be equally unjust, as seemed the gods who compelled Orestes to kill his mother and the other gods who punished him for doing so.

The man between two gods in Miss Morris's novel is Richard Bering, a conscientious objector who changed his mind, became a soldier, reluctantly killed a spy who was going to betray the secrets of Bering's country that could be any country. Since his murder or act of execution or of patriotism took place in time of peace when his nation wished to keep up the appearance of amity, Bering is condemned to death. When, a week before his execution, war breaks out with the country whose spy he has killed Richard is released and commanded to receive his nation's highest medal of honor. What goes on in his mind (and in the minds of the other characters) when he realizes he is a modern Orestes, condemned and praised for the same act, makes highly interesting and relevant reading for anyone who knows where we are and where we may go. The tempo of modern life—packing several eras into a lifetime—makes Orestes of us all.

The impatient reader who depends on the first third of a book to tell him whether the rest is worth going through will miss the very good things in "A Man and Two Gods." Too many characters, scenes, clichés, and irrelevancies, clutter the opening pages. Even later the man who expects total harmony will object to scenes that suggest the stereotyped thriller, to many of the characters who continue to be presented flatly in terms of a single dominant trait. But the problem and the Richard Bering who personifies it justify a novel that as a whole reveals an unperfected talent worth perfecting.

The Fall of the Yellow Book

"The House of Gair," by Eric Linklater (Harcourt, Brace. 251 pp. \$3.50), chronicles the melodramatic end of a man who made a fortune writing novels that were never published.

By Harrison Smith

ERIC LINKLATER is a remarkably versatile Scotchman who has written with equal felicity novels and autobiographies that have conveyed his own zest for life, though he is capable of restraining his ebullient style to suit the mood of his story. In two of his earlier, and perhaps best-known, novels, "Juan in America" and "Juan in China," he can be readily identified as the principal character traveling under a pseudonym across two continents. But no one could be more unlike Mr. Linklater than the reticent and introverted hero of his new novel, "The House of Gair." Stephen Cougat is a mildly celebrated novelist who was living in solitary misanthropy in a tidy old cottage in the highlands, solitarily because his unfaithful wife had eloped with her latest lover. It is obvious that no intelligent young woman could have lived long with so arid a man as Steven without wanting to run away from him.

One fateful evening Steven's ancient car ran out of gas, and he had to spend the night in the home of Hazleton Crome, master of an ancient and remote mansion known as Gair House. Crome he was able to identify as the author of a late nineteenth-century satirical novel greatly admired by the devotees of the *Yellow Book* and the critics of the time. Old Mr. Crome had read Steven's work, and his effusive compliments won the younger man's affection. There were two servants in Gair House, the cook, a Spanish woman who had once been Crome's mistress, and a shy, red-headed maid who would have been strikingly beautiful if she had not had an atrociously ugly harelip. Crome proved to be a born midnight conversationalist whose anecdotes of the dead past were tinged with malice.

When Steven could escape, he took his host's only published book home with him to read. He asked himself why a man who in his youth had

written so brilliantly had only one book to his credit and why he appeared to be so affluent. On his next visit he discovered the reason. Many of the wealthy and titled Englishmen and -women to whom he had had access had scandals locked in their closets which they would pay any amount of money not to have revealed. Crome had written several malicious novels under various pen names, using the material he had at hand, and a confederate would then suggest to his victims that his next book would tell all. He had lived for years on blackmail; and when, after the World War, nobody was interested in scandals, he found another source of funds in the sale to wealthy Californians of spurious paintings, attributed to modern masters.

CROME'S nephew was a charming and handsome young criminal who took large sums of money from rich old ladies, including, Steven discovered, his own aunt on whose bequest he was depending for his future security. When Steven returned to Gair House to confront the old man with his perfidy, he found him living in terror of his nephew, who was hiding there. The old house was charged with the threat of violence and death. When the explosion came, it swept everything away with it, the old man, his nephew, and his maid, and the house itself was burned to the ground.

Mr. Linklater's frightening termination of his story is a holocaust that would not be convincing if he had not led up to it so deftly in his previous chapters. In addition to its fascinating and odd characters and its tightly-knit plot, "The House of Gair" is one of the most convincing and well-written novels of suspense of the new year.



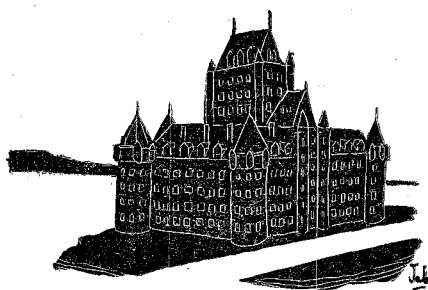
Ghostly Ghostwriter

"Children of the Wind," by Burgess Drake (J. B. Lippincott, 352 pp. \$3.50), is a fantasy about her mother and the lives of her two children who, it so happens, were never born.

By Charles Lee

THE SURPRISING psychical spree Burgess Drake takes in his novel, "Children of the Wind," will delight those who respond to the other-worldly allurements of a Robert Nathan or a Ray Bradbury. An off-beat novel of violence, humor, and magic, it has a whispery spell that is expertly maintained throughout the long narrative. Its characters, even the ghostly ones, have charm and vitality. Indeed, the book is so insistently haunting that long after one has turned the last page he may move in wonder through echoes, shadows, and "the breathing dusk." He may also avoid locked attics and the dank-er cellars.

The action takes place in the vast English estate of Chelling Close, and centers around the semi-tragic figure of Lady Hilary, whose repressed maternalism seeks comfort in dreaming about her aborted twins. The twins, "kindled into life" but never born, are slowly brooded into hallucinatory being by the unhappy woman and given the names of Janet and Trixy.



More attractive wraiths one could never hope to meet: Janet, "flame-eyed" and "flitter-foot"; Trixy, a scampering elf "with a face like April."

Nor are Trixy's unusual talents exhausted in mere poltergeistian prankishness (he's excellent with beetles, buttons, and mice), for he is a writer, too. He is, in fact, the narrator of "Children of the Wind." His account of how he and Janet develop from a mere melancholy breath of maternal fancy into invisible creatures with power over mind and matter is done with aerial humors and enchanting grace. Mr. Drake could not have employed a more artful or amusing ghostwriter.

But amusement is only part of Trixy's story; he has also terror and melodrama to offer. Chelling Close harbors an "air edged with battle." And all sorts of people roam its fifty rooms as if to sharpen it. Lady Hilary's solemn husband, a Cabinet minister who finds nature "disgusting," clanks about it in his armor of rectitude. Her mother, who lives "in a white anger of silence," has a troubled conscience to contend with and prowls about, in her gloomy shimmer of black silk, looking for the key to the morbid nursery that has become the home within the home for her tormented daughter. Lady Hilary's impressionable nephew, an artistic genius, falls under her spell and actually succeeds in catching on canvas an ethereal likeness of the floating luminescence that is Janet—whose intense love for him, however, is not returned. And Dame Geraldine, an authority on the occult and an expert exorciser, joins forces with the local vicar, a droll achievement in caricature, in an effort to thwart the "materializations" of Lady Hilary's slipping mind.

Things come to a climax when her nephew, defiantly unwilling to come to terms with the other-world, insists on bringing his fiancée into Chelling Close. Janet becomes flame indeed at this denial of herself, and Trixy, romper no more but historian, sets himself to record the strange chronicle of their passage in time. Tenderness is in it, along with gaieties, dark angers, high and low comedy, and a dance of the imagination.

Island Taint

"The Orchid House," by P. Shand Allfrey (E. P. Dutton, 223 pp. \$3), tells of the tragedy that befalls an ancient British West Indian household during a family reunion.

By Sara Henderson Hay

THE Island was "more beautiful than a dream, for in a dream you cannot smell this divine spiciness, you cannot stand in a mist of aromatic warmth and stare through jungle twigs to a spread of distant town, so distant that people seem to have no significance; you cannot drown your eyes in a cobalt sea, a sea with the blinding gold of the sun for a boundary. . . ." The Island is a real island, in the West Indies, one of the group of Windward Islands off the coast of Venezuela, under the British Crown. And P. Shand Allfrey, who grew up in it, has re-created in "The Orchid House" the haunting magic of its lush beauty, the exuberant and vivid colors, the violence, the decadence, the passion, and the terrible enervating quality which lurks in its warm tropic airs.

"The Orchid House" is the story of a family caught in the Island's spell, and especially the story of the three grown daughters who, having broken away from it by marriage, are drawn back for a simultaneous visit, each for her own reason and purpose. The narrator is their old nurse, Lally, one of the last of those devoted family retainers who lived in and for their white employers; Lally, who in another setting would have been "Mammy" speaking of her white children. The tragedy which engulfed the household stems from the Master's return after the First World War, shattered and broken in mind and spirit, and, as the reader learns gradually from Lally's account, the victim of drugs supplied by the sinister Mr. Lilipoulala, a periodic visitor whom as children the girls had instinctively hated and dreaded.

Through Lally's eyes and ears, in a mingling of memory and actual present, the reader is drawn into a web of horror and pitiable tragedy, into a drama which, though in part unresolved, concludes in an affirmative note. Against the background of Lally's narrative, the characters and personalities of the three girls and their absent husbands are drawn: Stella, the eldest, emotional and impulsive, who returns with her young son from the alien snows of a Maine farm; Joan and her six-year-old Ned, Joan, with the burning social conscience, who wants

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FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 561

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 561 will be found in the next issue.

IV XWWKZKXVZF TXHKNX

ZIV'O JX TSV PKOCGSO I

WXP CXTGXD DOSZL IJGSO

OG ZITTF GWW OCX

YSAAVXDD.—X. N. WGTDOXT

Answer to No. 560

A woman's heart, like the moon, is always changing, but there is always a man in it.—Punch.