

## Hindu Huckleberry

*"Swami and Friends and Bachelor of Arts,"* by R. K. Narayan (Michigan State College Press. 166 pp. \$3.95), are two short novels by a leading contemporary Indian writer, the former dealing with childhood, the latter with adolescence. Here they are reviewed by Joseph Hitrec, author of a number of novels about India.

By Joseph Hitrec



—E. W. Bartlett

## Barsetshire Anoints

*"What Did It Mean?"* by Angela Thirkell (Alfred A. Knopf. 346 pp. \$3.95), reports on what happened in legendary but nonetheless real Barsetshire at the Coronation time of Elizabeth II.

By Walter Havighurst

THE BARSETSHIRE chronicles follow promptly upon history. The war, the peace, the Labor Government, and the nationalizing of industries have all been recorded in the lives of Angela Thirkell's people in Barsetshire's towns and villages and on its great seats. Now, in *"What Did It Mean?"* we see how the county celebrated the recent Coronation.

From the dean of the cathedral to old Nandy in the Hop Pole pub, from the Duke of Omnium to old Badger, the West Barsetshire rat-catcher, everyone in the county was determined to observe the crowning of Elizabeth II in the proper manner, and many became involved in the preparations for Barsetshire's Coronation Pageant. This meant teas and luncheons, committee meetings and rehearsals, much discussion of the casting of the Historical Tableaux, many talkative sessions of the costume-makers. In these meetings "old differences were forgotten in the common cause," but some new differences developed, and, as any of Miss Thirkell's readers could anticipate, some relationships had changed before the great event was past.

It is a thin story, stretched out with committee meetings and given over largely to the women—Miss Pember-ton, Lady Pomfret, Lydia Merton, Mrs. Paxon, and the Bunce girls. "In Northbridge the male element was on the whole not much considered," and the organizing of the Evening

Entertainment in the Village Hall was clearly women's business. But even the committee meetings are spiced with Miss Thirkell's tart observations—about amateur theatricals, pronunciation on the wireless, the English weather, the British television ("Telly")—and so the tedium is rewarded.

Weather is a villainous force in this Coronation drama. On Saturday before the event it was still fine and warm, but Sunday darkened. On Coronation Day it had settled to Arctic chill and what the poet Gray described as "iron-sleet of arrowy shower." In London hundreds of thousands spent thirty-six hours or so "sitting on a curbstone with a mackintosh, a thermos, and some buns, to see the world's greatest pageant go by." Barsetshire had slightly more rain than anywhere else in England and a nastier wind—"all of which somehow redounded to the greater glory of the Empire and the bulldog breed."

"What Did It Mean?" applies to the cryptic prophecy of old Nandy, hawking and spitting in the pub:

Two score year and add thirteen,  
Then a Crowning will be seen,  
Crowning of a Queen so good,  
Mountain, steed, frost, fire, and  
flood.

The mountain turned out to be Everest, the steed Her Majesty's horse at Ascot, frost and flood the wretched climate of the Coronation season. But what about "fire"? And, of course, "What Did It Mean?" could be the title of any Barsetshire novel. It meant that the people of Barset went on gardening, gossiping, match-making, having luncheon on the terrace and tea by the fire, living determinedly comfortable lives in an uncomfortable time, being themselves through the course of events great and small.

WITH the publication of *"Swami and Friends and Bachelor of Arts,"* a volume containing two novellas by R. K. Narayan, the Michigan State College Press continues to show its faith in the ultimate recognition of this significant Indian writer by the American reading public. This initiative and enthusiasm are very much to its credit. Here is a contemporary Indian author with a growing reputation in his own country and abroad, writing with a quiet competence and engaging style, who is yet to be discovered and enjoyed by the rank-and-file of fiction readers in this country. A protege of Graham Greene, Mr. Narayan has published several hundred stories and some seven books in all, of which *"The Financial Expert"* and *"Grateful to Life and Death"* were brought out two years ago by the Michigan State Press, creating a few critical flutters where all was calm before.

The pair of short novels in the present volume are unconnected works, written at different periods, but they have this common ground: both are about youth and both unfold against the backdrop of Malgudi, a South Indian locality which has been the scene of much of Mr. Narayan's writing. *"Swami and Friends"* is a story of childhood in a mission school, a nostalgic and at times mischievous progress report on the doings of a group of children in and out of school hours. It is a sort of South Indian opposite number of *"Huckleberry Finn,"* but with a texture that is peculiarly and charmingly Indian. Even a detailed account of the plot here would certainly fail to communicate the gentle wit and limpidness of the writing, which account for such a large part of the reader's pleasure in following Mr. Narayan through the narrative. It ought to be enough to mention that the story is interesting, droll, surprising, and delightful in turns and stands alongside the best re-creations of Indian childhood in modern times.

*"The Bachelor of Arts,"* on the

other hand, is less well realized—perhaps because its theme is infinitely more complex and because Mr. Narayan allows his reportorial sense, tilting though it is, to skim away from the true potential of his subject matter. This pointilist study of adolescence among small-town intelligentsia centers around Chandran, the oldest son of a well-to-do-family in Malgudi. Chandran goes through college, graduates, and then takes some little time to fit himself into the groove laid out for him by his particular society. There are interludes of intense study, a brief love sickness within the narrow confines of a pre-arranged marriage that never takes place because the couple's horoscopes are incompatible; followed by a period of rebound in which Chandran hits the road as an ascetic for several months. But in the end he returns to his family and settles down to a steady occupation, even permitting his parents to look for a new bride for him.

It is pertinent to ask, therefore, why none of these goings-on contribute toward a rounder character of the young man. They do not, and this

is a serious flaw. Chandran reaches the end of his story in the same single dimension in which he set out—and the reader wishes that the author had been less detached, less muted about the whole thing. And this absence of emotion, of the capacity to exult and feel anguish, becomes expressive of the placid, well-trodden way of life under Hinduism, which does not give an individual enough room to thrash about in order to express himself. One wonders if that is one of the reasons why so many Indian writers have written delightfully about childhood and seldom as well about adult lives.

Nevertheless, among Indian writers of today R. K. Narayan is one of a small band veering away from the well-mannered, stilted styles of his country. Although his English prose may be said to descend from Tagore, it is a modern idiom in its own right, full of an easy grace and wistful humor that are admirably well suited to the material at hand. "Swami and Friends" in particular should add several cubits to the reputation built by "The Financial Expert" a couple of years ago.

## Phony Doc

**"Prisoner in Paradise,"** by **Garet Rogers** (G. P. Putnam's Sons. 438 pp. \$3.95), chronicles the rise and fall of a medical charlatan.

By Harrison Smith

GARET Rogers's "Prisoner in Paradise" is a rough, tough, and long medical novel. Its hero—if Spartan McClintock, born in a Southern town to a poor, half-witted, unmarried mother, can be called a hero—had one object in life: he was "an organism born to a single purpose, a single avenue of organic expression"; he intended to be a doctor. Without money or prospects he fought his way into a small medical school. Unkempt and crude, as one-dimensional and lacking in subtlety as a young prizefighter, he soon acquired another dimension; he wanted to be rich. Then disaster struck. A hill-billy jury sentenced him to twenty years in jail for murdering a country woman who was dying of lockjaw. He had told her he was a German doctor and had forced her to swallow an aspirin pill. His medical course was completed in the state prison where he was assistant to an alcoholic head of the sick ward. He was brutally beaten with a strap by a sadistic warden. His back was scarred for life, a misfortune which he later turned to profit by professing that he had graduated from a famous German school and had been tortured by the Nazis. When he was finally pardoned and given a license to practise in his home state he headed with a few dollars in his pocket for that paradise for quack doctors, California.

In Beverly Hills and Hollywood during the first year of the war he saw a host of rich, credulous, ailing people, hypochondriacs, neurotics, and the charlatans who fed on their real or imaginary fears. Inevitably, he ran across a loud-mouthed fraud, practising on the edge of the law and performing illegal operations, Dr. Horace V. Bootmaker, with a degree of Doctor of Empirical Medicine. When Dr. Bootmaker killed a patient in an operation McClintock blackmailed him. Soon he found himself in the inner circle of well-heeled frauds running a profitable health symposium devoted to making war against medical doctors and their powerful lobby in Washington, and proclaiming a world set free of death-dealing needles, murderous vaccination laws, public health bureaus, and their interference with nature's ways of healing.

In an inspired moment he invented his future profession. He became Spar-

