

# Cupid's Blasé Blush

***May We Borrow Your Husband? and Other Comedies of the Sexual Life***, by Graham Greene (Viking, 183 pp. \$4.50), assembles short stories whose subjects range from homosexuality to refrigeration of a dead baby. Nicholas Samstag is the author of "Come and See My Shining Palace" and other books.

By NICHOLAS SAMSTAG

THERE is almost no likelihood that Graham Greene ever set out to write twelve "comedies of the sexual life" (the subtitle of this collection). More probably he and his editor mulled over a gallimaufry of the author's short stories, vignettes, and other fragments in the hope of finding a group large enough to make a book and homogeneous enough to be hung on a single thread. The thread holds, but barely. These are comedies only in the literary sense of the term; in another, they are as funny as a crutch. And their similitude is more that of baroques than of matched pearls. Like pearls, they, too, are the records of unbearably irritating circumstances.

Why any chain at all was needed is one of the mysteries of publishing. Sufficient to the day is the wonder thereof—and many of these pieces are truly wonder-full. "How in the world does he do it?" one asks again and again; even though once in a while (as in the case of the all-too-appropriately titled "Awful When You Think of It") the question becomes, "Why in the world did he bother?" From the morsel "Beauty," a study in beastliness, to "Mortmain," in which a sly puss who was the most re-

cent mistress of a new husband promises to break up his marriage with her poisonously helpful *billets doux*, there is an economy of phrasing and a prodigality of intimation that approaches black magic.

Most of these offerings are, in fact, profoundly immoral in that they make so little of sinning. Or does that make them moral? At any rate, Greene seems intent on taking all the fun out of sexual wrong-doing by a sort of bleaching process that leaves us with a gray Satan and not even a blush with which to acknowledge our misdeeds of derring-do. This, mark you, is a very shocking process; I can promise that you will be duly shaken.

The central subject, for example, of two of these stories is homosexuality (one pansy, one butch). The first—the title story—flows into its conclusion with the inevitability of a natural phenomenon, and the second becomes a sort of

drunken romp. The man could as easily have been lost by drowning, the woman in a traffic accident. In another tale an unhappy but apparently attractive and self-respecting woman of thirty-nine gives herself to a self-pitying wreck of an old man, mostly, I think, out of boredom. A fourth is like a Charles Addams cartoon in story form. A man, flying economy class, carries "my wife's" dead baby home for burial in an overnight bag which he holds on his lap or puts on the seat beside him, fending off jolts and falling packages and such. There is much talk of putting it in the fridge ("a little perisher like that's no bigger than a chicken") and a lot of educational dialogue about how the corpses of newborn babies keep better because they're not half full of semi-digested lamb chops, apple tart, and *vin rosé*. Jolly.

But two of the stories aren't even baroques. "A Shocking Accident" is quite funny in its way, hardly sexual at all and rather romantic; while "The Gentle People" is a sensitive and wistful tale about the tardiness of Cupid. Maybe it was these two out of that devil's dozen that led the dustjacket writer to describe the author as having "a warm-hearted concern for the men and women who are the actors in these 'comedies.'" I wouldn't have said that exactly.

## A Sad Song of Eleven Summers

***The Last of the Crazy People***, by Timothy Findley (Meredith, 282 pp. \$4.95), traces the inexorable tragedy of an eleven-year-old boy in a family of middle-class Canadian neurotics. Margaret Parton frequently comments on current fiction.

By MARGARÈT PARTON

LIKE Ben Piazza, who three years ago wrote a moving first novel about boyhood called *The Exact and Very Strange Truth*, Timothy Findley is an actor. Again like Piazza, he is interested in boyhood and its relationship to the adult world, and he has an actor's ear for dialogue, an actor's eye for scenes. After three years, scenes from the earlier book remain vivid in the mind; it is probable that those created by Mr. Findley will also linger for a long time, if less happily.

The first scene sets the mood, and almost—but not quite—tells us what is to happen. It is early September, after a rainless summer. An eleven-year-old boy carrying a box tiptoes out of his house in the dawn, crosses the back yard to

the stable, climbs into the loft, and settles down in the straw by the half-open bale door overlooking the back of the house. The box is beside him, and so is his cat, Little Bones, whose "deadly, vibrant, yet clouded" eyes resemble his own. Together they wait and are still.

We gather from every careful word of this prologue that the boy is insane and about to do something terrible. The rest of the book, flashing back to the beginning of that hot Canadian summer, tells us of the events that have led inexorably to this September morning and of the people who contributed to them. And as we come to know the members of young Hooker Winslow's family and the middle-class community in which they exist, we begin to see that his inevitable tragedy is triggered not by one cause but by many, stress upon stress.

The central strain is Hooker's mother, Jessica, who has gone into a deep depression since her last baby was still-born, and now remains in her room reading religious books and cursing at the family she no longer loves. Her husband, Nicholas, is ineffectual, vague, preoccupied with the illness of his wife. Gilbert, their twenty-year-old son and Hooker's elder brother, is a brilliant

Q Bobbs-Merrill

### FLIGHT FROM THE REPUBLIC by NORTH CALLAHAN

This exciting narrative, supported by original sources, describes the plight of the Tories, who by the thousands fled to Nova Scotia, the West Indies, and England, hoping to return when the Revolution was suppressed. Their flight and plight proved that their relations with the mother country was only "parchment deep." This exceptional book throws light on a neglected but important aspect of the American Revolution.

illustrated. \$6.50

drunk. Rosetta, Nicholas's sister and housekeeper, is a hard, unloving woman, just interested in her brother's comfort and her own security.

Only Iris, the Negro maid, takes any interest in the lonely boy or the pet cats who are his sole companions. But when Gilbert precipitates crisis not even Iris, with all her good will, can answer Hooker's inchoate questions; nor is there any help, he finds, in the bewildering adult world outside. "In all houses, all families, was it true that no one really loved?" Hooker wonders near the end. It is no surprise that his final act seems like ultimate sanity.

*The Last of the Crazy People* is not light summer reading. But it says something important, and says it with both craftsmanship and compassion.



**Pseudo-Poet and -Man:** Readers, like lovers, demand continual returns for their loyalty and affection. And when the loved one disappoints . . . This is not fair, especially to writers, but it is, I think, true and inevitable. Thus, *Cabot Wright Begins* disappointed James Purdy's readers because it lacked the imagination of *Malcolm* and the intensity of *The Nephew*. His *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$5.95) is no less disappointing.

The homosexual pseudo-poet Eustace Chisholm is supposed to unify and give meaning to the varieties of love Purdy deals with. But, as in *Cabot Wright Begins*, these loves are at once too various—Eustace with his wife, Carla, and Clayton Harms; Daniel Haws with Maureen O'Dell, Captain Stadger, and Amos Ratcliffe; Amos with his mother, Reuben Masterson, and Reuben's gardener; Reuben with his grandmother and Maureen—and not varied enough. Moreover, Eustace is an inadequate reference point, too like the other major characters to be strikingly objective, insufficiently involved with them to be significantly subjective. The most interesting story, Daniel's fatal inability to accept and express his love for Amos, is obscured. The end is gripping, but comes too late to redeem the novel.

I'm not sure what could have redeemed it. Too much is gratuitous; many details are irrelevant—Clayton, who quickly vanishes, sells electric signs; Maureen's abortion is shockingly described to no purpose; social chaos (depression, impending war) never materializes as background, much less as the controlling metaphor it might have been. The book might have been saved by the qualities Purdy is admired for: sharp contrasts, jolting ironies, colliding contradictions, all of which can furnish the focus and definition that this story lacks. In short, Purdy fails to surprise. The

grotesqueries do not tease or tantalize; they are mechanical and predictable.

We open each new novel hoping to come face to face with something commensurate to our capacity for wonder. We rarely do. But in *Malcolm* and *The Nephew* Purdy did communicate that rare experience—in *Malcolm*, wonder at the bizarre; in *The Nephew*, wonder at the banal. And where we have once found it we want and expect it again and again, fair or not. In *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*, as in *Cabot Wright Begins*, there are the bizarre and the banal, but no wonder.

—BARRY GROSS.



**The Uses of Invisibility:** Whether as perceivers or perceived, most of us are grateful indeed for small visibilities, given the old shadow-box to shadow-box lines of communication which we seem to be stuck with much of the time—another melancholy heritage of the Fall, no doubt. Well, exactly the reverse situation is the peg on which Maude Hutchins hangs her latest fictional frolic: Clarissa, the child-narrator of *The Unbelievers Downstairs* (Morrow, \$3.95), latches on to invisibility as a means of asserting her very assertable personality. A wildly precocious and pixilated moppet, Clarissa decides that she's not orphaned, as everyone believes, but simply the invisible offspring of invisible parents, and so proceeds to behave accordingly, slithering in and out of rooms backwards and silently merging with walls when spoken to.

The laissez-faire atmosphere of her

grandparents' household, where she lives, is well suited to do-it-yourself invisibility, though it might make a rationally inclined square feel a bit edgy. Besides the grandparents, who spend a lot of time downstairs sitting around the living room, there's "Auntie" upstairs, who's beautiful and takes goofballs; insouciant Uncle Willie, who tangles with the law because of overvisibility in public; a handsome doctor whose appointed rounds bring him to Auntie late in the night, and a couple of servants who pop about like an addled Greek chorus. When the goofball lady goofs off completely one day, Clarissa—temporarily seeable—has difficulty convincing the Unbelievers that Auntie's supposed death is only a side-effect of having learned how to become invisible, and therefore not permanent.

Nor is anything permanent in this semi-demi-fantasy, and an attempt at analytic dissection could only result in both the tale and the dissector becoming totally invisible. The main point is that Mrs. Hutchins—whose novels baffle, bemuse, or bewitch according to the reader's temperament—is riding her broomstick high as a conjurer of the comic, making wide-eyed sport of sex, having light fun with voyeurism, and beating psychiatry over the head with a featherduster, all of it acted out in a raffish Never-Never Land by elvish creatures disguised as Real People. What happens amuses momentarily by its extravagant impudence, but the cream of the jest is the back-of-the-hand slap at solemnity, the refuge of the nonserious. An accomplished caper.

—PATRICIA MACMANUS.



"Daddy's going to make some money, Daddy's going to write a potboiler!"