

## BOOKS IN THE BALANCE

**Man who Lifted the Mountain and Other Fantasies** by Manoj Das. Illustrations by John Grandfield. Published by Spectre Press, 61, Abbey Road, Fareham, Hampshire, United Kingdom. Pages: 22. Price: 60 p; \$1.50. U.S.A.

PROFESSOR Manoj Das is among the few gifted writers of India who can wield the pen both in the mother tongue and in English with equal poise. A recipient of the Central Sahitya Akademi Award and many other prizes he has more than twenty-five books to his credit. This lovely slim volume adds one more colourful feather to his prestigious turban.

Set up in the good old days of kings and queens, these tales are embellished with original humour, sardonic undertones and inimitable metaphors. The book is a sheer delight to the young, and the author has something more to give to the grown-ups. In short, this quartet of enchanting tales, like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, gives different meanings to different readers at different times. Moreover, the fantasies are not written without a purpose. As the reader comes to the end of every tale, he is left to draw his own moral from it.

Plastic surgery can, no doubt, make a wood-cutter's daughter a perfect bride for a sighing prince. But too many specialists and experts aiming at perfection—which is an impossibility—distort a fairy and thereby create a bride sans soul—'that little old thing which is in every creature'. Modern Science can do wonders and at the same time it's capable of creating havocs too. This is what Prof. Manoj Das subtly stresses in his highly humorous piece 'The Perfect Bride'—the first story in the book that carries many a dig at the surgeons and officials. In the second tale, 'He Who Rides A Tiger', we encounter two types of men. Men of Words who never act and Men of Action who act but foolishly. The world abounds in men like *malis*, *kotwals*, *rotwals* and *huzoors* who are none but imposters. They know the art of making others think highly of them but when the matter switches to action they know the knack of escaping. Well! Here is a blow to all those who assume a superior air towards their inferiors. And let them not forget that superiors are only inferiors before their own superiors. The king, a man of action, acts foolishly. The only successor to the throne becomes a prey to the hungry tiger because of the king's foolishness. The tiger symbolizes the opportunist who makes the best use of the situation. Thieffou, the chief character in the title story, is a symbol of greed and exploitation. Desirous of taking personal vengeance on all officers and later the king himself, he is levelled and buried by the kind-hearted mountain itself. 'The Princess and the Story Teller', last of the four tales, tells how a hut-dweller (the story-teller) with his diligence and wit tamed a shrew, the princess, who finds delight in fooling men aspiring after her hand. No one can go on fooling people endlessly, for once in a while the superman strikes.

Every tale gives a concrete message and every line is tinged with humour. Similes, metaphors and hyperboles teem and they show the full-fledged poet in Manoj

Das. An example in each of these figures of speech will suffice:

a) The minister and his commander, both shaking *like blades of grass in the teeth of the wind*.

b) the *star-eyed and apple-cheeked* princess.

c) shed several *tear-drops as large as grapes*.

When any other writer would have said 'pin-drop silence' or, 'graveyard silence', Manoj Das who has his own way of expressing things writes, "Such was the silence that even a spider could have been heard spinning its web." Such is his descriptive skill.

John Grandfield's oriental illustrations are very apt and the artist certainly deserves high praise. In fact, this book is a mini treasure-house not only of short stories but of paintings too.

P. RAJA

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