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ALMOST A NOVEL.

SINCE both Miss Sylva Norman and Mr. Edmund Blunden are writers of some reputation and talent, and Mr. Blunden a poet into the bargain, it is difficult to understand why they should have chosen to collaborate in the creation of what they themselves have termed "almost a novel." It seems likely that they wrote "**We'll Shift Our Ground**" (Cobden Sanderson, 7s. 6d.) in order to amuse themselves rather than the light-novel public to which the book will probably appeal most; but this does not justify its pretentious cleverness or its over-subtle and superior kind of humour, and the travels of Duncan and Chloe across France remind one of a cake full of excellent ingredients and liberal spices which has failed to rise. It seems better, perhaps, to have no cake at all than almost a cake.

The qualities and faults of a novel like "**A Leaf of Laurel**" (Faber and Faber, 7s. 6d.) are extremely difficult to estimate. It would not be cruel to tell Mr. Leslie Meller to burn his book and rewrite it; it would be a tribute to the talents he possessed and had so misused in his story of the superstitious but intelligent young Australian who "takes a leaf of laurel in his mouth and walks

about with it all day." It might hurt Mr. Meller to destroy his book, but it would also chasten him, and this is what, as an artist, he most needs. "A Leaf of Laurel" is full of good things, but it is also crowded with atrociously pretentious passages that make one despair; and one despairs more because it is so obvious that Mr. Meller can write well if he will. He is like a man building with one hand and knocking down his bricks with the other, for as fast as he creates the atmosphere he needs by his good writing he is destroying it or marring it by passages like this: "Here it should be remarked, lest later on invention be accused of having gone stale, that in other subsequent events of this nature in his life, operations were similarly begun, by means of a glimpse here, another there"; or this: "these reflections, if not closely examined by the law of our new, imperious psychology, should pass as excellent side-lights on a situation which has cropped up before." In actuality it is too late for Mr. Meller to burn this book; but morally he can still do it, and must. His next book will be the better for it.

Mr. Frederick Philip Grove, unlike Mr. Meller, is not afraid of simplicity, and it is significant that one enters into the atmosphere of "Fruits of the Earth" (Dent, 7s. 6d.) almost unconsciously, instead of being forced to struggle for it. This is a story of the Canadian prairie, of the old but eternal struggle of man against the land, and of his love and sacrifice for it. It is honest, vivid, and convincing without being great. Nevertheless, Mr. Meller might learn much from it.

H. E. BATES.