

Books

Men of Iron

OUT OF CHAOS, by Ilya Ehrenbourg.
Henry Holt and Company. \$2.50.

EHRENBourg begins: "The men possessed the will and the despair,—they held out. The animals retreated." Construction at Kuznetsk was commencing: "Men came from all the four corners of the land. . . . In Moscow this was called the Five-Year Plan. Moscow planned, and Moscow did not budge. . . . Over the country railway engines strained to the bursting point. An anguished whistle issued from their breasts: do what they could, they could never keep pace with man. . . . Two hundred and twenty thousand men were engaged on the construction work there. Day and night workmen built barracks, but of these there were never sufficient. . . . Men lived as in a war. They blasted stones, felled trees, and stood up to their waist in icy water, fortifying the dam. . . . Fly-by-nights came to the construction works. They received boots and coat, and decamped for another construction works. . . . The road-paving brigade smashed the record. . . . On April fourth the fires in the first blast-furnace were lighted."

At the end Ehrenbourg writes: "From Kuznetsk men went to Mondy-Bash. From Mondy-Bash some pushed on to Temir-Tau, others went to Telbess. Men were plentiful in the land and the taiga yielded a few yards every day." These men spoke of the civilization and quiet of Kuznetsk. They fought in spring to hold back the rivers. May Day came, and Shukhaiev spoke: "We must remember the words of Lenin: Lenin said that iron was the chief foundation of our civilization. We must see to it that the Kuznetsk Giant is adequately supplied with our Siberian ore." The veteran Samushkin "faltered his sentences, stammered, mopped his forehead with his sleeve. But he spoke with feeling, and the workers listened to him." He concluded, "With such men we shall get iron, too, because they are stronger than iron. As an old Red irregular, I say to you that now I can die in peace, because, comrades, we have real men."

The fight against chaos is Ehrenbourg's theme, and the molding of character in that fight. Among the many who come to Kuznetsk is Kolka, a bored youth from Sverdlovsk. Kolka becomes a leader, a fighter. He becomes a man, with a brain and a will. Volodia Safonov, on the other hand, attends classes in Tomsk and writes in his notebook: "If I had lived a hundred years ago I should have been perfectly adjusted. I should have despised men as I do now. But they could have been creatures of my own species. It is impossible, of course, to despise the bees or the rain." He, too, goes to Kuznetsk, chiefly be-

cause he is in love with Irina, who has left Tomsk to teach the children of the Kuznetsk workers. But Irina is in love with Kolka. Volodia's nihilism leads Tolia Kuzmin to sabotage. Volodia goes home and hangs himself.

There are other characters in abundance—too many, some critics will say. But Ehrenbourg is not writing about the eternal triangle; he is concerned with men and women under the first Five-Year Plan. He does not isolate Kolka, Irina, and Volodia; on every side other lives touch theirs. And all these lives are being shaped by such a revolution as the world has never seen before. There is chaos in the book, just as there is chaos in the Russia Ehrenbourg describes, but out of the chaos order is coming. It is Ehrenbourg's ability to recognize the forces that are creating order that gives his book its unity. Confused and undirected as the various lives he portrays seem, they have a historic meaning that he perceives and communicates to his readers.

His achievement is all the more striking because he insists on treating his characters in terms of their intimate personal problems. His book is less objective than Kataev's *Time, Forward!*, and is therefore not so stirring but more memorable. What particularly impresses one is the realization that, though personal problems obviously exist in the Soviet Union, they are essentially new problems. In Irina's love for Kolka there are factors that could not exist in a capitalist country. Varia's unhappiness, when Glotov leaves her, is a very real unhappiness, but it is complicated—and alleviated—by emotions and attitudes that only the revolution could have made possible. Even Volodia, though his antecedents are recognizable enough, is by no means a character out of Dostoyevsky; his *Weltschmerz* has a peculiar tinge, for he is not only a misfit but also a misfit in a world in which misfits have become anachronistic.

Other writers have suggested some of the new qualities of life in the Soviet Union, but they have taken them so much for granted that they have failed to make them clear. Ehrenbourg, perhaps because he has spent so much time outside of Russia, has managed to communicate to western readers his understanding. This alone would make his novel one of the most important, for us, that the Soviet Union has produced.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

People Without Work

PEOPLE AT WORK, by Frances Perkins.
John Day Co. \$2.50.

DELEGATIONS of workers going to Washington to lay their grievances before Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins have at best obtained nothing but the promise of an "investigation." Sometimes they

cannot even see her but are put off with a message that the Secretary of Labor is too busy with important affairs to see delegations of rank-and-file workers.

If they insist upon seeing Miss Perkins herself, as did the forty women needle trades' workers the other day, then the labor secretary sits upon a dais above them, listens for a brief period but soon becomes impatient and cuts short the interview with the statement: "I shall have to make a study." Whether the workers' protest is against terror under N.R.A. codes, speed-up, long hours, and continued low wages, or against the proposed deportation of an organizer like Edith Berkman—the result is the same. Even liberal newspapermen seeking true figures on the extent of unemployment have been put off with an evasion. The labor secretary freezes up the moment an issue is pressed; she raises her lorgnette and dismisses the worker or the inquirer in the manner of *la grande dame*.

Now comes Frances Perkins' book, *People at Work*, explaining her philosophy of life, and the reasons for her evasions become clear for all to read. She is a politician writing in defense of capitalism and of the N.R.A. against radical attacks. She would of course clean up the worst mess in industry's front-yard; such "abuses" as child labor and the 12-hour day, 7-day week, in steel mills must go. She would minimize the effects of unemployment—admittedly chronic since "always in the United States about one-tenth of the wage-earners are without work"—by a system of "unemployment reserves." She offers no definite plan of unemployment insurance, but suggests that "any insurance scheme adopted might be so developed that employers who prevent unemployment get some benefits in reduced premiums, thus encouraging all efforts and plans for stabilization."

This concern for financial returns to employers is characteristic of the book, and it is in this basic defense of the profit system that Miss Perkins shows herself for what she is—a faithful servant of Wall Street and its government. From "The Backdrop" introduction where she sketches enthusiastically the rise of "our basic American fortunes and industries" to the closing pages of the 288-page volume, her theme is:

"Our industries and the profits from them will never be either safe or sound until they provide an environment and opportunity for the people who work in them which is as good as human ingenuity can devise and fit for the children of God." [My emphasis. G. H.]

Profits then must be "safe and sound" for capitalists to enjoy. The N.R.A. must provide "reasonable returns to capital." "Our delicate system of production" is "mobilized by profit possibilities." Well-managed corporations provide intelligently and effectively for "the stability of investment." It is necessary to recognize wherein lies "the security of investment." It is necessary to recognize wherein lies "the security of the investor and . . . in the long run, the security of the finan-

cial institutions of the nation." So runs Miss Perkins' argument. "We" must be "fair" to labor or "our own" investments will not be safe.

It follows naturally from this underlying concern for stock- and bond-holders' investments that Miss Perkins sidesteps the actual facts about unemployment in the United States in the spring of 1934. While dividends have been increased under the N.R.A. and production has risen, more people are in need of relief than six months ago. This conspicuous fact in the general press has been "overlooked" by the labor secretary. Indeed, between November, 1933, and April, 1934, the number of cases receiving relief in leading cities increased 11 percent, according to Federal Relief Administrator Hopkins. But the Secretary of Labor nowhere mentions this growth of destitution under the N.R.A.

She presents figures, indexes, for March, 1934, as compared with the month in which Roosevelt took office a year before. She claims that 2,750,000 persons had been put to work in manufacturing alone, not including "the 110,000 reabsorbed by the railroads; the 300,000 who were given jobs by the C.C.C., the people employed in Public Works and in the Civil Works and several hundred thousand others in active occupations not covered by the reports of the Department of Labor." Yet even the reactionary American Federation of Labor, consistently underestimating unemployment, claims an employment gain during the same period of only 2,780,000 in *all* industries and occupations throughout the country! And a realistic estimate of unemployment made by the Labor Research Association found approximately 16,000,000 still jobless in March, 1934.

But these black facts about unemployment and destitution in the United States after a year of Roosevelt and nearly a year of the N.R.A. do not fit into Miss Perkins' picture-puzzle of "New Deal success." She devotes eight pages to unqualified enthusiasm for the cotton textile code, with its wages of \$12 and \$13 a week. But she barely mentions the fact that workers "are not so well pleased with the speeding up, through which they do in eight hours what they did formerly in ten."

Her only interest in strikes is to break them. Therefore of course she does not even think it worth while to justify the strike-breaking practiced by her department in sending her assistant Edward F. McGrady to end the coal miners' strike in the autumn of 1933. Again now she has sent him to the Pacific Coast to call off the longshoremen's strike. Her only interest in union organization is to turn it into a vehicle for keeping the workers quiet, in "cooperation" with capital.

The labor secretary's silence on these basic questions of the workers' struggle is more eloquent than her utterances. Most significant of all is her complete silence about the terror used by employers against workers who have dared to strike under the "New Deal." Scores are arrested. Strikers are murdered on the picket lines. But Miss Perkins writes blithely

on about how "democracy" mobilizes this power of association and "cooperation."

GRACE HUTCHINS.

Evolution of a Liberal

MODERN ART, by Thomas Craven. Simon and Schuster. \$3.75.

In an article on the progress of painting which appeared in the *Dial* in 1924, Thomas Craven concluded that the "glory of the (modern art) movement rests with examples of individual nobility. Post-Impressionism has given the world genuine artists, men with intelligence and creative wisdom."

At a time when American millionaires were still loath to invest large slices of unearned increment in the paintings of Matisse and Picasso, Craven expounded the merits of these artists with the full force of his conviction. In breaking down collectors' sales resistance the art dealers found his articles useful. At the same time, Craven unmercifully flayed the dealers as a greedy lot responsible for the artist's wretched plight in modern society (just as pacifists blame the munitions makers for causing wars).

In 1931, or Year III of the depression, Craven brought out *Men of Art*, a thick volume of picturesque biographies of personalities in art since the end of the middle ages. He now completely renounced his earlier probing into psychological nuances of art appreciation, and bluntly declared that great art needed no special key, that it was an intelligible interpretation of life itself. The glories of Post-Impressionist art he now reduced to the lonely figure of Cézanne, replacing Matisse, Picasso, and the other fallen angels with Rivera and Benton, because of their "social content."

He also advanced a theory of exceptionalism for American art: our artists are in no danger of falling into the snare of abstraction and introspection, of art for art's sake, because "we build and invent, destroy and replace, attaching no value to our handiwork beyond that of function and service." Incidentally Craven shares this viewpoint regarding function and service with Henry Ford.

And now, in the Year V (depression reckoning) appears another fat book by Craven devoted exclusively to muckraking modern art. Described by the publishers as a sequel to *Men of Art*, it is actually an expansion of the tail end of that book, with a few unimportant additions.

It opens with a lurid description of Bohemia, including autobiographical details calculated to stir the envy and admiration of sex-starved artlovers. The history of Bohemia, the only true center of which is Paris, is traced from the middle ages to the present days. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, we are told, the Bohemian district of Montmartre still drew serious artists. But "by the end of the next decade (1800-1900) Montmartre was beyond redemption. The Moulin de la Galette, now a low-class dance hall for sol-

diers, working men, shopgirls and laundresses . . . appealed to dissolute painters on the hunt for color and the coarser forms of sexual commerce."

What drove the "better element" out of Montmartre? It seems it was the greed of the French middle class, which put Bohemia on a commercial basis. And when Bohemia fell, art went with it. Craven sums up the effect of the Parisian system as follows: "Woman is the curse of the artist. She no longer inspires, she dominates him. The artist, being weak, impressionable, and incapable of self-discipline, in other words, Bohemian, inevitably acquires the tone and characteristics of the stronger personality, the prostitute." So now we find (eternal) woman sharing responsibility with the art dealer for the ruination of art and artists in capitalist society.

The exposition of this thesis, occupying nearly two-thirds of the book, consists of a sequence of biographies that form a fragmentary, superficial account of European art of the last sixty years. A single page is given to Seurat, but it takes the author sixty pages to wring every thrill out of the lives of Van Gogh and Gauguin, not omitting the later's "taste for dark meat" (referring to the Tahitian women).

The first twentieth century eruption of extreme individualism in the Fauve movement is considered by Craven "the culmination of anti-bourgeois tendencies." Here he mistakes anti-philistine for anti-bourgeois tendencies. Actually Fauvism, and its successors, Dadaism and Surrealism, fall, except for one phase of German post-war Dadaism, entirely within the orbit of bourgeois ideology. Cubism and its progeny, also typical late-capitalist phenomena, are likewise misunderstood by Craven, who considers them meaningless because they have no subject matter.

Having laboriously disposed of the Post-Impressionist artists and their aberrations, the author is at last ready to face forward, to expose those fundamental social issues which even Bohemia can no longer ignore. This involves a change of scene—from Europe to America—and another background sketch in which our red-blooded author is again the hero. He exhibits his Anglo-Saxon antecedents, which presumably qualify him "for the leadership of a genuine American expression," in contrast to "Stieglitz, a Hoboken Jew without knowledge of, or interest in, the historical American background."

He rambles on, moaning over the passing of the frontier, talking glibly about the significance of subject matter, again and again evading the class issues involved. Finally the defender of American art comes through with a skimpy chapter on his contemporaries. He describes John Sloan as "a social radical and a deadly realist . . . who has waged many a battle for social decency." He hails as a "landmark in American mural painting" the cheap ballyhoo of capitalist exploitation painted for the Kaufmann department store in Pittsburgh by Boardman Robinson, one-time radical. He finds that Bill Gropper "has spurned the shelter of the studio to chart a definite