

Books and Things

DERMOD FLYNN, who tells in the first person the story of Patrick MacGill's earlier book, "Children of the Dead End," published by Messrs. E. P. Dutton & Company in 1914, is an Irish farm laborer, who goes to Scotland and works as a navvy, lives a tramp's life between jobs, and does a little journalism in London. All I know for certain of Mr. MacGill is that he has led much the same sort of life as Dermot's, and that he is now at the front with the London Irish. Newspaper cuts represent him as a young man, a little under thirty, one would say, with a handsome mask, with bones showing under the lean flesh, with indomitable eyes and mouth.

As for the rest, you must make it out as best you can from Mr. MacGill's books. On the title-page "Children of the Dead End" is described as "the autobiography of an Irish navvy." "Most of my story is autobiographical," Mr. MacGill says in his preface. "Nearly all the incidents of the book have come under the observation of the writer." The distinction between the observed parts and the invented parts is here of no importance to the reader, for it all sounds true. Even the principal mistake Mr. MacGill makes about himself is evidently a sincere though unjust criticism of himself as a writer. "I studied literary style," says Dermot Flynn, describing a "literary frenzy" which took possession of him, "and but for that I might by this time have cultivated a style of my own; I read so much that by this time I have hardly an original idea left." The implication is unjust, for Dermot Flynn does not obtrude his ideas. What matters is the things he sees and feels. His courage matters most of all. He is rarely light-hearted. The raw life his eyes have seen is a terrible life. His perception of its cruelty and degradation and hopelessness is part of the fabric of his character. Yet his courage abides. "Never yet have I given in to my man," he says of himself as a fighter, "until he knocked me unconscious to the ground." That is just my notion of Mr. MacGill.

Dermot Flynn is quite wrong about his style. It is a style in which he can say what he wants to say. He often wants to describe sensations. "A shower of fine ashes"—he is telling us about shovelling ashes on a railway—"were continually falling downward and resting upon our necks and shoulders, and the ash-particles burned the flesh like thin red-hot wires. It was even worse when they went further down our backs, for then every move of the underclothing and every swing of the shoulders caused us intense agony. Under the run of the shirt the ashes scarred the flesh like sand-paper." Better still is a sentence from the description of Flynn's fight with Gahey; "A vicious jab from Gahey slipped along the arm with which I parried it. I hit with my left, and the soft of my enemy's throat jellied inwards under the stroke."

However, "Children of the Dead End" is not a book which can be judged sentence by sentence, or page by page. You must read it as a whole, for an unsentimentalized picture of the navvy's existence, his work, his joy in drinking and forgetting and fighting, his point of view. "On Sunday afternoons, when not at work, I went to hear the socialist speakers who preached the true Christian Gospel to the people at the street corners. The workers seldom stopped to listen; they thought that the socialists spoke a lot of nonsense. The general impression was that socialists, like

clergymen, were paid speakers; that they endeavored to save men's bodies from disease and poverty as curates save men's souls from sin for a certain number of shillings a day." Here is Dermot Flynn's account of the navvy's attitude toward women: "The great proportion of the navvies live very pure lives. . . . This is remarkable when it is considered that they seldom marry. 'We cannot bring children into the world to suffer like ourselves,' most of them say. That is the reason why they remain single."

"Children of the Dead End" is a chronicle story. All sorts of persons wander in and out of it, just as they might wander in and out of a navvy's real life. Such unity as it has, and it doesn't try for much, comes chiefly from the fact that our point of view is always Dermot Flynn's, and that his changes just so much as a real man's changes while he grows older, and partly from the imaginative skill with which Dermot Flynn's love story is treated. In boyhood Dermot Flynn had a good friend in Norah Ryan, a girl about a year older than he. The growth and change of his feeling toward her, his increasing inability to forget her when they are separated—these things are shown us with extraordinary lifelikeness and beauty.

Norah Ryan is the central figure of Patrick MacGill's new book, "The Rat-Pit." (George H. Doran Company: \$1.25 net.) We meet her first when she is a child of twelve, setting off on foot, alone, before sunrise in winter, to buy wool to knit socks with. She is a gentle child and unselfish, living on the Donegal coast not far from the village of Greenamore, stinting herself of food so that her father and brother and sick mother may keep a little further from starvation. All her life, in her childhood in Ireland, and when she goes to Scotland as a potato-picker, hardly more than a child, extreme poverty is about her, starvation close to her and nearly all her friends, "like ocean round a diving-bell." You may possibly have wondered, after finishing "Children of the Dead End," and finding it good, whether after all Mr. MacGill could ever write anything that wasn't autobiography. This question is answered in "The Rat-Pit." Dermot Flynn's attitude toward Norah Ryan was imaginatively remembered. Norah's attitude toward Dermot is finely imagined.

These people have almost no thoughts. They have no time for such things. They work long hours at heavy and ill-paid tasks, and they sleep oftenest in filth. Theirs are sordid lives, made up of labor and pain and slow dreams. "The Rat-Pit," a record of these simple sordid lives is, even more than it is a book of pity, a book of beauty. The shaping imagination with which Mr. MacGill was not concerned when he wrote "Children of the Dead End," helped him to write "The Rat-Pit." Except just at the close, where there is something almost melodramatic about the crowding together of natural misfortunes, something artificial about an incident which Maupassant has narrated without artificiality, the book's tone is absolutely unforced. And what a series of pictures it leaves in one's mind, as, for example, of the Donegal seacoast in winter, with women asleep in the snow. Norah Ryan is very young when in her ignorance she is seduced and forsaken, when she bears her child and takes to the streets, and when she sickens and dies. And just as one's deepest impression, after reading "Children of the Dead End," was of a courage that cannot be conquered, so, after finishing "The Rat-Pit," one's deepest impression is of a purity that abides till the end.

P. L.

Neither Devil Nor Angel

One Man, by Robert Steele. New York: Mitchell Kennerley. \$1.50.

THE merit of this book is in that it is supremely interesting, and revealingly American. It is not a novel but an autobiography, and tells everything—quite everything—that happened to the author between his first and thirty-sixth year. Here you see a man who is a fool at times, and very much of a healthy animal without any really deterring moral scruples, going his way, stealing at five years of age, running away two or three times, forging checks, getting in with various women, having two illegitimate children, one of whom dies at birth, getting married twice, and so on—a series of details that keep you stirred up mentally, weighing, judging, accusing, casting stones. The one thing that struck me forcibly was that the book had intense reality, and a kind of romance about it that was sweet even though gauche and middle-class. The things that irritated me were the author's tendency to weep freely, and his moralizings and prayers. Every fourth or fifth page he calls on humanity to witness how evil he was, or how serious were his efforts to reform, but how weak he was in the face of desire—remarks which amuse, but which impress one only unfavorably.

I sometimes think that the passion to conceal and seem different from what they are is only equaled in the majority of people by their power to dream something better. Where people conceal much and dream much they resent those rude facts of life that expose themselves to themselves, or pale or destroy their hopes for themselves. And outside the triturating facts of everyday life which bruise and destroy some while making others smooth, I know of nothing so forceful as a true book to reveal one's self to one's self, or shatter flaccid, aenemic notions of how things are. For the facts of life come slowly, and over a long period of years. But in a book you may get it all in a day, and in about three hundred and seventy pages, as in the one we are discussing. And when they are facts and of an unmoralistic, hard, and lifelike value, they cut and burn and sting just as do the real encounters of life, or nearly so.

In America, England, and even France to-day, because of all the stress of war, perchance, there are such strivings after the ideal, and such dreams of the perfect as we have not seen in some time. It is said of Hebraic history that the arrivals of its prophets are always coincident with its period of grossest materialism. Why? Was life made better by their coming? Were there no greater or worse days of materiality than those against which the prophets railed? Or were they not just another evidence of the systole, diastole of nature—that is, where there is heat there will be cold, where vice, virtue, etc. Hundreds of years after Isaiah and Jeremiah came Rome and the Middle Ages and the Borgias. The world saw France of the Revolution and before. Neither Asia, Africa, nor the tropics anywhere have responded to the ideal in conduct. Life everywhere has gone on sinning—as the religionist sees it—sometimes thinking it sin, sometimes not, sometimes regretting, sometimes not. In America in our day we have developed a vast passion for righteousness, and we are getting better.

It is for this reason, I think, that a book which pictures the primeval Adam in man is always resented by the majority. It raises the old thought that perhaps we are not as good as we think we are. It pictures us as mere naturals with a veneer of manners sprung from the compulsion of

living *en masse*. The interesting thing is that all who breathe never object to being called "saint," while they heartily resent "sinner." Yet each individual carries around with him a modification of the code he has prepared for the other fellow, and this modification is for his personal use only. Christ shouted "Hypocrites!" and "whited sepulchres," and Burns added, "Oh, wad some power the giftie gie us." But nature goes on breeding the same blundering machine which was invented in the deeps of time. Does one need to say again that we are neither devils nor angels, but men?

This autobiography reiterates this fact in a simple, direct way, and you see at once the old critical thing happening. The spindling, moralistic book reviewers, pale reflections of lockstep editors and the policy which the publisher is anxious to provide for the other fellow, once more raise their hands in disgust. The old phrases are trotted out for use, "a sordid recital of vice and crime," "not one ray of anything beautiful in it," and so forth. Aside from being a gripping account of actualities which the author himself has experienced, it lacks the power to interpret them. It has truth in it—the whole truth—even the truth that damns the author as a misinterpreter of himself and his motives, but lacks genius of style and perception. What can you say for a man who believes that smoking thirty to forty cigarettes a day produces vice and crime by deteriorating the moral character; or who, because of a vigorous animal personality, has gone from one to thirty-six, eating his way through all the dishes of life via theft and lust to satiation, finally deciding that he has reformed morally, and that now he is a good man whereas before he was a bad one? He thinks that by taking heavy thought in a mountain cabin at the last for ten days he swings himself into the right path once and for all, whereas anyone who has followed the psychology of the human animal knows that this is what nearly always happens when the animal has had enough. It is not so much a matter of spiritual awakening as of material change. The machine clicks at a certain point and registers a new hour. That is what happened with Mr. Steele, only he thinks he aligned himself with the Will of God. Where was this Will, I would like to ask, when he was sinning, and why did it not trouble to stop one little mortal before it began? And what is it doing about all the other animals that are being born and will sin, filling the penitentiaries and jails—and, in the future the high public offices with honored citizens? The human animal is moral or it is not, but life itself is not moral. Life may and does demand an equation between extremes, but that should not concern the individual who is writing of life, or at least not to the detriment of his story. The business of the writer as I see it is to put things down as they are, not as they ought to be.

But because of the truths which this author has set down the book will certainly be condemned as lewd, vicious, sordid, whereas because of its theories, as I have pointed out, which have nothing to do with its intended honesty, it is in part only a great success. Psychologists and philosophers—or literary geniuses, who are always both—do not make the mistakes which Mr. Steele has made. It is a rather astounding autobiography which may be mentioned but not classed with the Confessions of Rousseau, Pepys's Diary, etc. For these men, whatever their faults, were not moralists to the extent I have described. They would not find in cigarettes an incentive to crime. Nor would the fact that a father failed to demonstrate his love for them in their youth stand as the cause of their subse-