

the skies. "The roving mind falls back at last upon a stoical self-identification with the specific Man, upon self-forgetfulness in enduring work for the world community"; but not without hope of chirk-ing itself up every now and then by local and temporary identifications with individual women. Part of the evolutionary process, one may infer, of the growing up into racial maturity, is learning to be really happy and comfortable in the rarefied atmosphere of promiscuity, with no longing backward glances toward the primeval monogamous slime.

As to whether Man can actually accomplish what he must accomplish, Steele's hopes varied. "The idea of a world revolution taking place concurrently in the minds of men and in human organization must arise in due course in the developing racial intelligence. There is no acceptable alternative." But a little later: "Is this conception of a New Model for humanity a rational forecast or a self-protective dream? Steele had moods in which this question was possible. His answer varied with the quality of his blood stream and the vitality in his body." At this we might as well leave it, if Wells in forty years and forty volumes has been able to carry it no farther.

With little novelty in content, and such sedulous reshadings in the constant endeavor to attain a closer approximation to the truth, this is a book of particular interest to writers, especially if they deal with such serious and obscure topics as concern Wells. Essentially it is a mental notebook, filled with all the things that suggest themselves to one of the most active minds of our time. Some of us could almost wish that Wells had written a novel about the life of Steele instead of a critique of his ideas. But Wells seems to have come to the conclusion that there is no time for fripperies of art when the world needs saving. To ask for a novel instead of a missionary sermon is perhaps only the pusillanimous escape-impulse of those who, conscious of their personal inability to control the fire in Rome, would like to be diverted by a violin recital.

The Courage of the Defeated

THE TROUBLE I'VE SEEN. By Martha Gellhorn. New York: William Morrow & Co. 1936. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH

WHEN a book seems woven not out of words but out of the very tissues of human beings, on first reading its evaluation as literature is almost impossible even to a hardened reviewer. This is such a book. Its four stories ring as true as a report from a relief worker's notebook and it is not until you have closed its covers on little Ruby's mother "dragging down the street" the wrong way to her house, and have emerged a little from the ravaging pity the characters have evoked, that you begin to think of the art inherent in their telling.

Miss Gellhorn, we are told, was sent by Harry Hopkins to travel over our country and study the lives of the unemployed. From all that she met and felt she has chosen four groups from four regions and through them she has shown us the physical and spiritual tragedy of millions who in the past few years have seen the collapse of their faith in life. And she has told their stories with so profound and sympathetic an understanding that she has not once been tempted into exaggeration or sentimentality.

All four have to do with Americans once confident in their ability to win a secure future for themselves and their families, now on the relief rolls. With the exception of Joe the labor-leader, they scarcely attempt to understand their situation. They belong to the multitudes who have asked only for the simple things—a home, friends, enough to eat, and the job which makes these possible. When through no fault of their own they see their security gone, their lives stripped finally of dignity and independence, they are left desperate, bewildered, or hopelessly passive. Their pain is the intoler-



UNEMPLOYED

Photo by F. Allan Morgan, from "U. S. Camera, 1935" (Morrow).

able one of mortally hurt children made only the more poignant by that saddest and most heartening of all human qualities, the courage of the defeated.

The first story deals with the gallant and lovable Mrs. Maddison and her irrepressible dreams; of how she became a part of a rural rehabilitation project and of her struggle to save her children so defiantly determined to get a little fun out of life before it is too late. "Joe and Pete" tells about a strike; "Jim" of young love on five dollars a week; and "Ruby" is the story of an eleven-year-old girl who had to have roller skates. Miss Gellhorn in this last has used a theme almost unendurably sordid and raised it to the realm of true tragedy by infusing it throughout with the shining innocence and beauty of childhood.

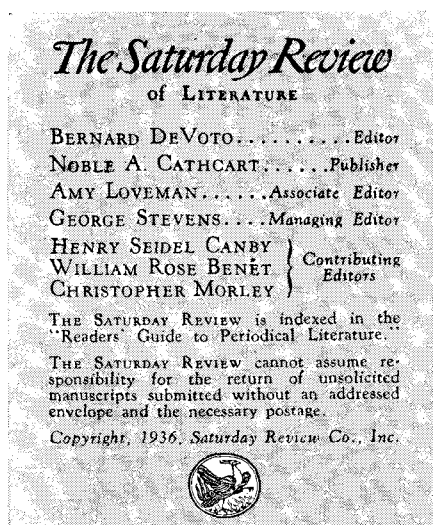
This is a tragic book, but in no sense a morbid one, not even a "depressing" one in the usual meaning of that word. Miss Gellhorn has seen not only physical hunger and spiritual despair on the relief lines. Existing side by side with these she has seen love and courage. Her vivid clarity spares us nothing. We are often moved to an almost intolerable pitch, but she leaves us with a renewed faith in the worthiness of the human struggle and eager to clear the decks for action.

There are still thousands of people in the United States who think of the relief problem in terms of taxes only; thousands more who dismiss it from their consciousness with the vague belief that if a man is willing to work he can surely get something, or by oft-repeated stories of shovel-leaners and chiselers. All of these should read Miss Gellhorn's book. Those who have had first hand experience with the complexities of relief work will rejoice that through this clear-eyed young woman hundreds of their own "cases" have found a voice.

Lunch with the Sole Survivor

By KENNETH FEARING

MEANING what it seems to when the day's receipts are counted and locked inside the store and the keys are taken home,
feeling as it does to drive a car that rides and rides like a long, low, dark, silent streak of radio waves,
just the way the hero feels in a smash-hit show,
exactly like the giant in a Times Square sign making love across the sky to a lady made of light,
And then as though the switch were thrown and all the lights went out,
then as though the curtain fell and then they swept the aisles and then it's some one's turn to go,
smoke the last cigarette, drink the last tall drink,
go with the last long whistle of the midnight train as it fades across the hills,
Meaning what it seems to mean but feeling the way it does,
as though the wind would always, always blow away from home.



Prize Novels

OF the two prize novels so far unveiled this season, one is a little below the average struck by such contests and the other just on the median line. In an otherwise sound review of the *Atlantic* prizewinner, Mrs. Van Etten's "I Am the Fox," the *Nation* remarked that the committee of selection, if its make-up had not been changed for the worse, must have changed its standards for the worse. On the contrary, "I Am the Fox" is a better novel than "Dusk at the Grove," which was awarded the prize two years ago. Both books are spun out of the phony sensibility which the *Atlantic* judges seem principally to admire but Mrs. Van Etten's is not written with the vanilla amateurishness that made Mr. Rogers's so cloying. It is a professional job, if something less than a good one. It would probably have got a modest hearing on its own merits, as "Dusk at the Grove" certainly would not have done, and the chief objection to it is the author's self-deception. She regards her heroine's frigidity as an ennobling delicacy of soul, whereas it is only a neurosis.

The book groups naturally with the three others that have won the *Atlantic* prize. It has the requisite novelty of presentation—a technique more adult than the ten-percent free association of "Dusk at the Grove" which accommodated the manner of Joyce to the understanding of high school English classes. And it is suffused with the requisite romantic glow which is the common characteristic of all four prizewinners. The essential *Atlantic* novel remains the first one, Mrs. de la Roche's "Jalna," and its successors have only in part recaptured that asserted gallantry of picturesque and darkly brooding people behaving like a refined Sanger's Circus in a transplanted atmosphere of Maurice Hewlett. The *Atlantic* prize novels, in short, are women's magazine serials with a touch of suavity.

Mr. McIntyre's "Steps Going Down," the Miss America of Farrar & Rinehart's All-Nations Competition, is a better

novel than "I Am the Fox." That is not to say that it is a very good one. It has an intermittent vigor, a good many scenes are done with dash, the incidental wisecracks are frequently good, and there is a gratifying absence of rhetoric. But Mr. McIntyre's technical judgment is unsure and, stripped of its superficial novelties, his book is conventionally romantic to an extreme. The gabbiness of his characters is exasperating and makes the book diffuse, the whimsy of what he presents as their philosophy of life is much less amusing than he thinks, and they are stuffed with sawdust and move unrealistically through a familiar melodrama. This too is essentially popular magazine fiction. The distinguished judges whose opinions of it are quoted on the jacket and who find it a fresh note, must have forgotten the Merriwell books of their boyhood and neglected to read the *Saturday Evening Post* these twenty years. Or were their sympathies perhaps unconsciously engaged by a hope that an exhibition of such élan in the lower depths might prove a rebuttal to the rudeness of proletarian fiction? At any rate, the publishers must have rejoiced at another appearance of the sentiment that proved so popular in "February Hill:" see how high-hearted are the amoral poor. Whether their entry will take the finals of the transoceanic contest remains to be seen. If it does, let us remember that Thomas Mann and Jules Romains write good novels too and that some of our best native novelists, like them, did not enter the tournament.

With one exception, the Harper prize has always gone to better novels than any so far mentioned here. In fact, "The Grandmothers" was a distinguished novel and "Honey in the Horn" clearly a good one. "The Dark Journey" is probably entitled to the same praise, and though both "The Perennial Bachelor" and "The Fault of Angels" edged close to the romantic tinsel objected to in the *Atlantic* winners, the first escaped it by way of a fine malice and the second by way of an excellent comic sense, and both were unexceptionable in workmanship. The list somewhat supports the declared theory of prize contests—but how much? Even "The Able McLaughlins," which was by a completely unknown writer, and all its successors except "Brothers in the West" would probably have made their way in open competition and would probably have made quite as much money for both publisher and writer if the same amounts had been spent in some other form of advertising.

The public is told that a prize competition may reveal a new writer of great talent. The probabilities, however, are heavily against such an event, and the publisher who conducts such a contest can depend far more certainly on the attendant publicity's promoting a sale of from twenty to fifty thousand copies of the winner than he can on uncovering a

new talent. As often as not the prize is won by an established writer who happens to have a one-book contract with his last publisher. When it isn't, and usually when it is, the prize goes to a book which has some surface novelty of subject matter, setting, or technique that can be exploited, and is also safely embedded in the more genial sentiments. How much money such contests make only the publishers know, but any of us can see that they have done little for the careers of the writers who have won them, and less than that for literature at large. The art of fiction continues to be served by novelists who have to learn their trade by the accretion of experience and skill in book after book, and are withheld from such contests by loyalty to, contracts with, and advances from the publishers who stick with them through the long drudgery. A season's publicity is, of course, something else and prize contests have usually justified themselves as advertising stunts, though not always. Indications are that even as advertising they become increasingly less dependable. The returns seem less and less to justify the irritation, friction, and downright trouble that contests invariably cause. If that is true, if both public and publishers are tiring of them, why not begin to think about abandoning them? They would not be missed. No masterpiece has ever been discovered by a prize contest, no even moderately good novel will go unpublished if left to the simple competition of publishers, and the public can better exercise the difference of opinion that makes hoarse races and literary reputations if it is not misled by a publicity mechanism that has nothing whatever to do with literature.

Ten Years Ago

In reviewing Ellen Glasgow's novel, "The Romantic Comedians," in *The Saturday Review* of September 25th, 1926, Henry Seidel Canby wrote: "No matter how jazzed the age or how incoherent the philosophy of a new time, the men and women who do more than drift giggling, weeping, or moaning upon the rapid current will be subjects for a narrative more solid than impressionism and more significant than a reporter's tale." He pointed out, however, that "the merely cultivated novel" was, and always had been, "one of the seven deadly bores of literature" and that "the novelist must have everything of insight, fire, awareness, originality that the boldest experimenter or the wildest rhapsodist possesses, and be able to turn them all to the uses of interpretative art." He concluded that "when a mind as subtle and as civilized as Miss Glasgow's looks at our generation there are new things to be said, new thrills, new beauties, a new kind of tragedy. Only the irony is old."