

What Does Life Hold for Teachers?

MISS MUNDAY. By Sophia Engstrand. New York: Dial Press. 1940. 345 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by KENNETH HORAN

THE business girl leads her own life, but the teacher lives someone else's. That is the theme of Miss Munday's career. By reason of her own education, she resents the more elemental aspects of life, and wants rather to become a part of its cultural progress. In fact, her teacher's training has unfitted her for the life of a woman.

The little Wisconsin school teacher who could not digress from her profession is a more poignant heroine than, for instance, Kitty Foyle. She longs for a rich existence, but she can't seize her opportunities. It is impossible for her to choose between poverty, although it represents romance, and a fairly comfortable mode of life with school teaching as its horizon. She has been taught that the children under her care must not only be educated, but given principles of conduct as well. She conforms to the straight-laced mode of life of the villagers, while the P.T.A. and the principal's wife set the standards of polite behavior, not to say of ethics, so her days are spent in teaching and her evenings are spent in brooding on the narrowness of her outlook. She falls in love with the fisherman, Adam La Fonde, and she wants terribly to marry him. But she is first, last, and always the school teacher, and the struggle for a new world is lost by her own training.

So this subtle study of a woman's nature versus her imposed habits is more than just a school teacher's story. It is a contrast between a possible personal life, and a superficial mannered life. The mold which is set on that army of women who earn their livelihoods by teaching became Miss Munday's motive power, and in order to cast it off for her dreams, she would have had to deny all her training and her education.

The village, the good-looking, well-educated girl, who has put the accent on knowledge, the honorable and attractive young fisherman doomed to a work-with-your-hands existence, the busy, gossiping people, the indefatigable P.T.A., the irrepressible children, the boarding-house keeper who is worried if her teachers stay out after dark, all make a colorful group in this story of professions versus homes for women. It is the fate of such a one as Helen Munday that causes the ulti-

mate wonder. For if a profession by force of its own power robs its members of the more elemental aspects of life, that profession is killing the well-springs of its being. It does offer a certain future, fairly drab as age approaches, but on the other hand it snatches the rich opportunity of personal choice by its hollow forebodings. So that a really earnest school-teacher never sees the importance of other ways of living.

When Helen Munday turned away from the linoleum-covered floor of Adam's cottage, she chose for herself

a path of easy security, against that of perilous adventure. School teaching had made her choose, and school teaching would justify that choice in future years. The connotations of such conclusions are infinite.

This novel, which won the Dial Press Award for teachers, is distinguished because of its implications.

Kenneth Horan, a Chicago newspaper woman, is the author of "Remember the Day," an autobiography; "Oh, Promise Me," and a recent novel, "Night Bell."

The British Tramp Trade

WATCH BELOW. By William McFee. New York: Random House. 1940. 375 pp. \$3.

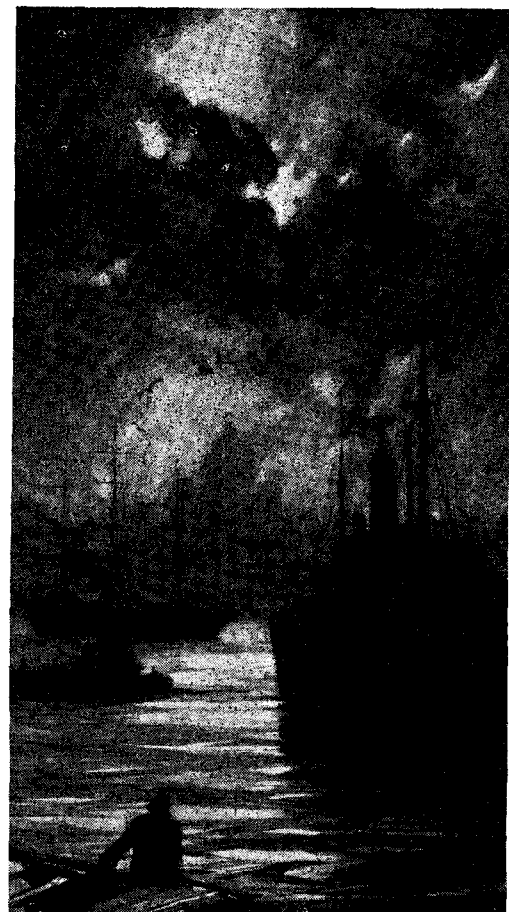
Reviewed by FLETCHER PRATT

WE have here the spectacle of Mr. William McFee exhibiting a case of perfect literary adaptability. He seems to have discovered or determined that he can write nothing well but personal narrative with the feelings and doings of the individual in the foreground. He had an assignment, either from his own mind or from the publishers, to do a book on the small tramp steamers which founded Britain's commercial hegemony between the coming of steam and the end of the George V era. The subject would not strike one at first glance as susceptible of narrative treatment. But Mr. McFee knows better; he opens with some charming personal memoirs of a waterfront boyhood; offers a few remarks (without statistics) on the underlying reasons for the growth of the British tramp trade—and is off, astride the well-broken nag of his ability to tell a tale.

The eyes before whom the tramp trade passes in review are those of a probably apochryphal cousin named Jim Barnes. As the main body of the book opens he is just leaving a preliminary course of machine-shop training to become the lowliest type of 'prentice engineer on a freighter. We have a view of Jim's home and family, what they eat and talk about, before being translated to the working departments of the said freighter. As it happens she is a hungry ship, under a captain who is a good deal of a scrooge. Jim doesn't mind—in fact, if the book has any central point, it is that men whose talents and energy would get them a good deal in shore jobs, men most various in all other particulars, will submit to bad food, long hours, low pay, and insecurity for the sake of going to sea.

Why? Jim makes his second's ticket and goes on another voyage in a better ship, with a skipper of a type opposite to the first one. This time we get a look into the intimate concerns and conversation of the other engineers and some of the deck officers—follow them through visits ashore, the day's work and accidents. The crew form no more than a Greek chorus; the contacts that impress are those with inanimate objects and the shore, or of the officers with each other. And in these contacts the reasons for seafaring are set forth with a wealth of complex detail—as are the human and mechanical elements of a service. Without conflict, without plot, without conclusion or conclusions, "Watch Below" is nevertheless a better record of life than most of the novels in print.

From end-papers of "Watch Below"



Declassed Citizens

THE TRIUMPH OF WILLIE POND.

By Caroline Slade. New York: Vanguard Press. 1940. 370 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by JAMES T. FARRELL

THIS is Caroline Slade's second book. Her first, "Sterile Sun," was a remarkable little book containing three fictionized case histories, written as stories, and telling us about prostitutes in their own language, and in the pattern of their own thoughts. The first of these stories, about a young girl named Sue, stands, in my estimation, among the finest of contemporary American short stories. While presenting these stories as if told by the girls themselves, Miss Slade, who is a retired social worker, reveals unobtrusively the pattern of social influence and social causation which drove them along a path ending in misery and disease.

Mrs. Slade's transparent honesty and sincerity set down nearly everything. She writes with an almost belligerent determination not to compromise with reality, not to spare details. While Mrs. Slade is at times technically careless, she possesses a most valuable kind of imagination. Her imagination functions in her ability to cast herself in the role of the other: in this case, the other is the submerged human being who classifies as belonging to "one third of a nation." Her ability to see as her characters see, to understand their bitterness, their ignorance, their irrationality, their quirks, and their attitudes shows a functioning of imagination in that precise realm where an author's imagination should function—in the understanding of other human beings. One of the primary tasks of the fiction writer is to create character. And that Mrs. Slade can and does achieve. Her characters are vividly and painfully real.

"The Triumph of Willie Pond" is a first novel. As such, it is a most impressive work. It tells us, in the story of the Pond family, what has been the moral cost of the economic crisis which has persisted in this country for more than ten years. What is happening to that "one third of a nation?" What is being done to them morally and psychologically? What are their attitudes? How, precisely, do they live? What is the day-by-day pattern of their lives, their fears, their hopes, their aspirations? What are their children like? Mrs. Slade understands what poverty means, and how it translates itself into the psychological processes of those human



Willie's triumph is an act of self-destruction.

beings who live in poverty. Thus, the Ponds are endlessly concerned with those aspects of human functioning and living which others take for granted and do not heed. Dirt, food, plumbing facilities, these all have a different meaning in a tenement from that in a middle class or wealthy home. They have a different meaning in the minds of tenement inhabitants, and Mrs. Slade describes poverty by revealing such meanings concretely.

Her novel is also rich in irony. She spares neither government nor social workers. In fact, she is most sharp in her descriptions of social workers. The Ponds are bossed by social workers, and dependent upon them. To the social workers, they are another file number. They must answer, and answer almost endlessly, personal questions, private questions, questions which humiliate them. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Slade's description of the role which social workers play in the lives of the Ponds tends to justify this writer's definition of many social workers: they are persons who have learned by scientific method at major universities how to ask poor people why they are poor. Despite the social workers, despite the poverty, the insecurity, the shiftlessness caused by dirt, sickness, and utter hopelessness, we see in the Ponds a normal American family, one which in different circumstances, would be decent, self-respecting, and self-supporting. Ironically, Willie Pond, declassified, and a WPA worker who earns ten to twelve dollars a week on which to support a family of nine, is more valuable to the community ill than he is well.

When he is injured in an accident, he is discovered to be a TB. case. He is transferred to a sanitarium and two thousand dollars a year is expended to cure him. While he is in the sanitarium, the Pond family is transferred to a different relief bureau, and they are enabled to live in better circumstances. The mother is pensioned. The family manages its own budget, and regains its self respect. This will all stop when the father is cured. When he is returned to society whole in body, they will have to go back to the old way of life in a vermin-ridden apartment. Willie's triumph, to save his family, is an act of self destruction. Then, his fatherless children and widowed wife can continue living off of her pension. Society could not be more irrational when it produces such tragedies.

Much these days has been written about the American way of life. Here is a story of Americans, a story of some of the moral and psychological costs of our way of life. It is a story that cannot be ignored. Caroline Slade has given us, in this work, the articulate voice of that political football of election campaigns — "the forgotten man." In her pages, "the forgotten man" lives, talks, and suffers.

Germany's Iron Front

THE LIGHTS GO DOWN. By Erika Mann. Translated by Maurice Samuels. New York: Farrar & Rhinehart. 1940. 282 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by MARIANNE HAUSER

IT all happens in a small Bavarian town, in one of those charming, medieval places that we see depicted on the posters of the German tourist bureau: winding streets, bubbling fountains; old, gabled houses, dreaming backwards. A stranger walks through the benighted streets. What's wrong with Germany? It's a beautiful country. Even the red flag with the swastika looks gay and pretty. Then two Stormtroopers pop out of the enchanted calmness, asking him harshly why he doesn't listen in to the Führer's radio speech. The stranger, who fortunately is a foreigner, grows slightly disturbed. And later, after he has watched people in a restaurant and talked to a taxicab-driver, his dream of a lovely Germany has vanished. During his sleep the town transforms itself into a grim nightmare.

We suppose the stranger will pack his things and take the next boat home. His nightmare is the real Germany, the sick Germany behind the