

Fiction. If you were among the numerous readers who enjoyed watching Robert Penn Warren develop his theme in "All the King's Men" or admired J. D. Salinger's character study in "The Catcher in the Rye," you should take notice of three novels we review this week. The lust of a politician for power, which Warren's story developed so notably using the American South as its background, is the subject of Joyce Cary's fine novel about contemporary Britain in "Prisoner of Grace" (below) and of Richard Lee Marks's interesting if not quite successful tale of Argentina, "March of the Hero" (page 19). The growing pains of the precocious adolescent which Salinger pictured so poignantly and which was also the subject of an able novel earlier this season (Russell Thacher's "The Tender Age" [SR Sept. 20]) is given perceptive Gallic analysis in André Brincourt's "The Paradise Below the Stairs" (page 17). Yet another noteworthy story of childhood, Daniel Doane's "The Crystal Years," will be given its due in next week's issue, as we begin to catch up with the huge fall fiction output.

Cage of Decision

PRISONER OF GRACE. By Joyce Cary. New York: Harper & Bros. 301 pp. \$3.50.

By JAMES GRAY

JUST when one has come to wonder if the novel may not have become an outmoded and exhausted art form someone appears with a work of imagination that takes a stimulating thrust at the intelligence. The attitudes of Joyce Cary's "Prisoner of Grace" are not strictly new; nor for that matter is the work itself. But there is enough freshness to its hearty cynicism to let a breath of air into the studio where so many young writers seem to lie huddled together in a state of lugubriously tranquilized self-pity.

The theme of "Prisoner of Grace" is one that has been made familiar to us in this country by such novels as Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men." This English version has to do with the gradual corruption of an important labor leader. The very skill with which he turns every occasion to his own account accomplishes his moral undoing. The slightly feminized, thoroughly hysterical Chester Nimmo is so fascinated by his own legerdemain that he sees himself evolve into an artist in treachery without allowing any damage to be done to his self-love. He betrays his constituents, his principles, his friends, his private morality until he sits at last on the ruin of an ideology, smug, sweet, forgiving, and thoroughly evil.

Supporting this public pageant of corruption is a secondary account of moral decay within the intimacy of marriage. It is the theory of one of

Mr. Cary's characters that human beings continuously corrupt each other and that the spiritual hazards to which one exposes oneself with wife or husband are inescapably blighting. Certainly the people involved in Mr. Cary's triangle achieve a surprising new variation on the theme of degradation. It would be unsafe to say that this is unbelievable since Freud, Krafft-Ebing, and Kinsey have persuaded us that anything can happen. But it is true to say that the presentation here of shocking matters entirely misses the impact of pity or of terror. This is in part because all the people concerned are intensely unlikable.

And it is in part because the woman of the triangle, who is also the narrator of the story, wavers so oddly in her appraisal of values, seeming now as preternaturally shrewd and observant as Mr. Cary himself and again as naive as a soap-opera heroine. Perhaps the difficulty is that our American civilization produces few women as utterly passive as the curious Nina of "Prisoner of Grace" is represented to be. No doubt the native equivalent of Nina would be equally adept in sin, but it is rather hard to believe that her resistance to a perverse authority would so closely have resembled that of *crêpe de chine*.

From the standpoint of style, the book clatters with challenge. If the parenthesis had not existed Mr. Cary would have had to invent it, so completely dependent upon it he shows himself to be in this book. One of Robert Frost's characters once suggested that "good fences make good neighbors"; similarly Mr. Cary seems to feel that good parentheses make good sense. He forgets that they also make hurdles to jump and that these are hardly aids to smoothness.

But clamorous as it is in the statement of a half truth, "Prisoner of Grace" nonetheless is addressed to the adult mind and it speaks engrossingly. This is, in fact, the book that Sinclair Lewis spent the last years of his life yearning to write. He made one depressing stab at it in "Gideon Planish." Had he been able to set down any such declaration of a lack of faith as Mr. Cary has managed, he might have died a fulfilled, instead of a frustrated, artist.



—Jacket design from "Prisoner of Grace."

Fierce Commencement

THE PARADISE BELOW THE STAIRS. By André Brincourt. Translated by Herma Briffault. New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce. 292 pp. \$3.

By HENRI PEYRE

THE postwar generation of younger French novelists has not yet displayed the force and originality of the 1940 vintage or of the 1930 one. But names of writers of promise who, at thirty, are already expert craftsmen and sensitive analysts of inner life are gradually being revealed to the American public. Along with Nimier, Zérafra, Bazin, Gracq, Devault, and Rossi, André Brincourt stands among the brilliant débutants of the last five years. His "Vert Paradis," here translated (the French title was taken from a line of Baudelaire on child loves) won one of the most coveted of the 147 annual French literary prizes, the Grand Prix du Jeune Roman. "Jeune" it is, indeed. Its chief originality is in its power to see and depict life, grown-ups, dreams, and misdeeds from a child's point of view.

François, a thirteen-year-old boy from a "nice" French family, lives in a private universe in which the frontier between fiction and reality is blurred. He is just emerging from childhood, restive under the scolding of his parents, a rebel against his teachers, resentful against his looks of an angelic choirboy, yet very close to the state of grace in which his early years were spent. He yearns desperately for friendship, first thinks he has discovered it when idolizing for a brief moment a schoolmate of his whose ideal was that of a scout. He turns to his elder brother, Gerard, a medical student, who is baffled by the innocence of François and by his uncanny ability to conceal and to lie.

He joins a gang of three other boys at his school, to whom he reveals the paradise below the stairs that he has explored: a cellar with mysterious corridors, serpent-like pipes, furnaces, discarded furniture, an old bed. They play at being outlaws and conspirators, haters of the girls at their school, whom they torment brutally. A new pupil arrives: Myriam, a Jewish girl from North Africa. She is dark and beautiful, gifted in her studies, intoxicated with love poetry and with her hero, the poet Musset, and far more precocious than the boys. She lures François into forbidden caresses and tries in vain to rape the innocent child, who still fears and refuses the world of men. After



Georges Simenon—"inexorable forces."

some strange practices, including nude dancing for the gang in their cellar, she provokes a brutal brag-gart, bolder than François, into actual sex relations. When later she reveals to them that she is pregnant, François, out of generosity and with the strange loyalty of boys conspiring against grown-ups, offers to pretend that he may be responsible. When questioned, he soon collapses into childish remorse and sobs. Meanwhile the fourteen-year-old Myriam dies tragically while trying to practise an abortion upon herself. The lesson of punishment is learned by the imprudent boys who had stumbled into crime.

The novel is occasionally slow-moving and does not escape the pitfall of a story about schoolchildren trying to grow into adolescents: childishness. The blind unawareness of parents and teachers, unable to enter into the children's world, is almost unbelievable, though real life affords many an illustration of it. The dialogues between the two brothers do not always sound convincing enough and lack conciseness. But the book is in most other respects an artistic success. It is well-written, ably translated, and, without any didacticism or psychological pedantry, it constitutes a most revealing document on child delinquency and on the awkward age when innocence and fairy-like imagination blend with cruel, self-tormenting, and almost criminal impulses. Many parents might read it with profit; other adults, who do not easily resign themselves to the fading away of the child in them, will read it with nostalgia. Few novelists have been able to make childhood thus come to life. It is strange that the French, who long lacked a child-literature, should have written recently so many startling books on children.

Dead as Love

ACT OF PASSION. By Georges Simenon. New York: Prentice-Hall. 238 pp. \$3.50.

By HARRISON SMITH

TEN years ago Georges Simenon's detective stories were becoming increasingly popular in this country. He had published two hundred novels in France and had invented a strangely fascinating detective named Maigret, a slow-moving, heavy man who compassionately but remorselessly recreated the mental processes of the murderers he inevitably caught. By the time he had laid his hand on the unknown man he had been pursuing, the reasons for his acts were clearer to him than to the victim whose whole life he had laid bare in the process of discovery.

Then, perhaps inevitably, Simenon decided to abandon the static form of the detective story and write novels of the eternal conflict of good and evil. In Maigret he had personified Nemesis in human form, though a murderer's conscience can be an even more remorseless hunter. In his new phase he has created four or five somber and fascinating novels which might have been written by a psychoanalyst, except that he does not use any of the language or the devices of the psychiatric novel. One might say that in discarding Maigret, Simenon has assumed the personality and the passion for uncovering the truth with which he had endowed his fictional detective. The sufferings and the crimes of the sinner are still there, and also the compassion and understanding which had given a unique quality to his studies of crime and detection.

In "Act of Passion" the criminal reveals his own life and the inexorable forces which compelled him to murder the only woman he had loved. The story is told through the confession, written in the form of a letter to the judge who had condemned him, a hard-working, humane, provincial doctor. It is, in a sense, a horrifying story, and it can be presumed that if he had been allowed to recite it in court the jury and the judge might have released him on the ground that the agonies he had suffered were sufficient expiation of his crime. But he had refused throughout the trial to defend himself or to appeal to a jury which, since it was composed of Frenchmen, might have been lenient to a crime of sexual passion.

Charles was a moderately successful physician in the Vendée, harmless and kindly as a shaggy house-dog,