

but let it be said with no such intention, for, though the situations into which it is possible to put the crew of a submarine tend toward stereotypes, they do not do so here and, in addition, Commander Beach has avoided the opposite error of making his people so individual that they are a bunch of freaks. Indeed, the book almost deserves the abused classification of "semi-fiction," so painstaking are its details and so carefully assembled. —FLETCHER PRATT.

STALKING A RED: "Day of Reckoning" (Holt, \$3), a novel by Ralph de Toledano, has some of the elements of an exciting thriller. It is built around a baffling crime and it presents an interesting hypothesis, involving treason in high and low places. Mr. Toledano links the murder of an Italian journalist (whose fate resembles that of the late Carlo Tresca) with Soviet espionage, and he sends a quixotic American newsman scurrying after the killer in hard-boiled private-eye fashion. Paul Castelar, the avenger, stokes himself with Fundador, fondles his Beretta, and stalks a Communist hatchet man from Harlem to a Puerto Rican graveyard, with significant detours on Park Avenue and in Washington, D. C. Like any good Raymond Chandler-type sleuth, Paul is irresistible to girls (though he modestly wonders why) and invulnerable.

Though Mr. Toledano's hero moves fast on occasion, his story does not—slowed down as it is by a surplus of rhetoric and a dearth of action. This inactivity would be excusable if Castelar had some genuine interior problem; but the die is cast early in the book, and the rest is a matter of mechanics. The mechanics, however, are too well oiled; there are no really tough obstacles in Castelar's way. To paraphrase Mickey Spillane, it is all too easy. By the time the moody avenger realizes that "he was tired of talking, of repeating the story of Gino" (Continued on page 30)



—Illustrations from "Laurette."

With J. Hartley Manners—"torture hidden."

THE DISTAFF SIDE

From Hell and Under

"Laurette," by Marguerite Courtney (Rinehart, 433 pp. \$5), is the biography of the actress Laurette Taylor, whose career veered dramatically from bleak childhood to stardom to alcoholism and back to stardom.

By Allen Churchill

STAGE star Laurette Taylor was born Loretta Cooney on 125th Street in upper New York City. Her father, genial when drunk, was a sullen, defeated man sober. Close at hand he kept a whip and with it almost daily thrashed his spindle-legged daughter. Her mother made no effort to stop the beatings, but on every possible occasion rushed the child to the balcony of a theatre, where she hoped to kindle an interest in acting in Loretta.

Between the extremes of harshness at home and the magic of the stage—says Marguerite Courtney, Miss Taylor's daughter, in "Laurette," a tender, touching, and altogether rewarding biography—the child found a nether world of unreality where she lived until the final years of her life. But, unlike most escapists, Miss Taylor had genius (Helen Hayes and others have called her the greatest actress America has produced). This enabled her to live out the dream world while on the stage. For the harsher, less exciting world beyond the wings the impish actress who created "Peg O' My Heart" used two husbands as buffers between her and reality. When the second, and far superior one, died she was totally lost, to become the alcoholic who after ten almost hopeless years made such a triumphant comeback in "The Glass Menagerie."

Even so, the witty, ebullient actress with the Tom Sawyer grin can't altogether be explained in such terms. She was somehow able to develop, even while emotionally undeveloped. Both her marriages—the first at sixteen—were to men her superior in years, education, and (supposedly) mentality. She caught up to each, left him behind. It seems incredible, but it was handsome movie actor John Gilbert, whom Miss Taylor met cataclysmically at the peak of her career, she perhaps should have married. But when she got up nerve to ask her second husband for freedom

she found that the remote, dignified J. Hartley Manners understood her so well he could demolish the idea with a single sentence. In ten years Gilbert was dead and she was a drunkard.

Because of its alcoholic overtones—Hartley Manners too drank, but always like a gentleman—"Laurette" will be compared to Lillian Roth's "I'll Cry Tomorrow." Picture a whole family lying awake night after night "frozen with misery and horror listening to the sounds from [Laurette's room on] the third floor, sounds which seemed to come from hell and under . . . wildly crying out in loud inhuman voice on the vistas of damnation it had come to know."

But essentially "Laurette" is the story of a light spirit, with all torture hidden. Much of it is as colorful as Miss Taylor's life seemed to her public. Reading of the talent-parties at the house on Riverside Drive is a lively and nostalgic experience. Laurette was far from the sweetness-and-light girl she portrayed in Peg. Once when Mrs. Pat Campbell complained of being sixty-nine her acid-tongued hostess snapped back, "But, Stella dear, you don't act a day over ten." Laurette treated her daughter none too well, alternately spoiling and forgetting her as a child, making her a prime target of abuse when she drank. It's a pleasure to report, in a day when childhood supposedly counts for everything, that Mrs. Courtney bears no resentment toward her problem mother. She probes deep, but never forgets Laurette was one of the great actresses, and for that alone deserves to be treated with compassion.



On stage—"witty, ebullient."

The Empress's Apprenticeship

"The Memoirs of Catherine the Great," edited by Dominique Maroger (Macmillan, 400 pp. \$5), contains the recollections of the fabulous Russian empress's first thirty years, bringing the story down to three years before her accession to the throne. Professor Ernest J. Simmons of Columbia University, who reviews it here, is the author of a number of studies of Russian literature.

By Ernest J. Simmons

IN AN age when published accounts by rulers, famous statesmen, and public figures of their lives and activities have become a commonplace, Dominique Maroger's English-language version of the eighteenth-century "Memoirs of Catherine the Great" forces comparison with them in the dangerous art of autobiographical self-revelation. Catherine writes more in the intimate spirit of the "Confessions" of a Rousseau rather than as a maker of history, which is the approach Sir Winston Churchill employs in his remarkable post-war memoirs. Further, Catherine is everlastingly aware that she is a woman in a man's world, in which feminine weaknesses are not easily tolerated by the foible-ridden swaggering lords of creation.

The "Memoirs," unfortunately, covers only the first thirty years of Catherine's life, ending three years before her accession to the throne. And since the manuscript was written over several periods during her long reign, hindsight no doubt plays a part in the motivation which she attributes to herself and others for political behavior and actions during the years of her marriage to the future Peter III. Historians, to whom the "Memoirs" has been accessible in the original French, have long since recognized this possibility and thus have tended to question the veracity of Catherine's account on various points.

Nevertheless, Catherine's story has the ring of truth as one of the frankest exposures of a great sovereign on the stage of history. Contributory evidence has largely supported the unflattering picture she gives of her husband, so utterly unfit to rule an empire, though she deftly avoids im-

plicating herself in the events that led to his death or murder. Nor does she solve for posterity the legitimacy of her son the Emperor Paul, though it seems to me that the evidence of the "Memoirs" points pretty clearly to her lover Serge Saltikov as the father of this first child.

These unsolved problems, however, do not detract from the principal achievements of the "Memoirs"—the remarkably frank portrait that Catherine draws of herself, and the brilliant historical picture she provides of Court life in eighteenth-century Russia. Here the high literary skill of Catherine the writer of plays, essays, and scintillating letters is everywhere manifested. As a girl of fifteen she journeyed from the tiny principality of Anhalt-Zerbst to faraway Russia, the destined bride of the future heir to the throne, a dissolute buffoon who spent his time playing with toy soldiers and training scores of dogs in their nuptial quarters. With a wisdom beyond her years she set out at once to prepare herself for a lofty destiny. In a revelatory passage in the "Memoirs" at the time of her betrothal to Peter, she wrote, "I felt little more than indifference towards him, though I was not indifferent to the Russian Crown." She cultivated her mind by omnivorous reading, strove to gain the friendship of all around her, learned the Russian language and the customs and manners of the people, became more devout in her adopted religion of Russian Orthodoxy than the natives themselves, and trod warily among the vicious intriguers who beset her on every side. When the time of crisis came she was fully armed to take her place as the head of an empire which her faltering husband almost willingly abdicated. And the subsequent achievements of her reign testify both to the thoroughness of her preparations and her natural abilities.

THE "Memoirs" barely lifts the curtain on that aspect of Catherine's character which historians have denominated her greatest weakness—her sensuality. For only three lovers, of the fifty-five which one historian has attributed to her, appear in these pages—Saltikov, Poniatovski, and Gregory Orlov. She herself declares that if she could only have had a husband who loved her she would



—Frontispiece from the book.

Catherine—"high literary skill."

have been faithful to him. Circumstances, however, prevented this. She gave a great deal of herself to those whom she sincerely loved, such as Gregory Orlov and Potemkin, but to the parade of temporary favorites who marched through her life, up to her death at the age of sixty-six, she gave only the moments she snatched from her multitudinous daily tasks. One of them said that he was for her a sort of male courtesan. For the most part she worked and loved like a man.

Certainly no future ruler ever underwent a more trying and discouraging apprenticeship than Catherine. The "Memoirs" presents a stark picture of her trials. The winds blew through the rooms she occupied, and they were often infested with vermin, rats, and mice. The demigorgons the Empress Elizabeth placed over Catherine tormented her with their cruelty, suspicion, and spying. No sooner did she find affection in one of her ladies-in-waiting than the Empress would remove her. Catherine's children were torn away from her at their birth and she never saw them for weeks on end. And her weak-minded husband's harsh scraping on the violin which alternated with the howling of the half-dozen spaniels he trained for hunting lasted from seven o'clock in the morning until the small hours. "I admit," writes Catherine, "that I was driven half mad and suffered terribly as both these musical performances tore at my ear-drums from early morning till late at night."

In such a setting Catherine grew to queenly stature, and the "Memoirs" reveals this process with a wealth of detail and a literary flair that make this work absorbing reading.