

Book Reviews

The Inconclusive He

SIMON CALLED PETER. By Robert Keable.
New York: E. P. Dutton & Company.

ADAM AND CAROLINE. By Conal O'Riordan.
New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

A STRIKING after-war phenomenon which, instead of badgering the corpse of yesterday, notes that it is a corpse and passes on. It assumes various matters that but now were points of embittered and increasingly tedious argument. It assumes that maturity is senile, that dignity is asinine, that modesty is a bore. It ascribes all wisdom to the nosing puppy and all charm to the shrieking flapper. It assumes that the flapper loves a puppy who noses, and that the puppy delights in a flapper who shrieks; and that neither can reasonably carry love beyond the hour or the moment when the cosmic hunger (that is, the individual desire) is sated. Self-realization is the thing: one doesn't realize oneself by exercising the domestic virtues or the social restraints of yester-year. One lets go the twig of creation on the chance of landing somewhere, and anyone who happens to be strolling beneath does so at his or her own risk. The hero of this fiction is a person without solid belief in anything but the sacred claims and exemptions of his own fluttering ego. He need not do or be anything useful or generous or even ordinarily sensible. He takes what he wants when he wants it, meanwhile keeping up an incessant patter of boot-strap philosophy. He moves about his world like a skitter-bug on a puddle, and expects everybody to be intensely interested in his gyrations. That's what he is skittering for.

The two novels before us are not extravagant examples of this kind of fiction, but it is what they come down to. They are everything that is brilliant and "well-written" in the lesser senses. There is more than a trace of original flavor about them both. Neither of them is concerned with the grosser and more casual forms of "self-realization" so often propounded nowadays. Neither Adam nor Peter is a dirty fellow. But (and here is the real ground of my old-fashioned plaint) neither of them is much of anything: except a bundle of more or less amiable, if uniformly self-centred, impulses and possibilities. Now the theory of this interpretation, I take it, is that we are all really this kind of youth: those of us who have the luck to be alive—that is, young—at all. Some of us are ashamed of the situation and try to conceal it from ourselves even—but there we are, all Adams or Peters, and why not be frank about it? Well, the only answer I think of is that there is no harm in being frank about the ordinariness of ordinary men; but that what we live for, what keeps us alive, is the faith in the extraordinary man

or youth, here and there, to whom belongs some force or beauty, some heroic quality of character to which the rest of us cannot attain. And our faith in this marvel is so strong and unshakable that a realism which denies or ignores it never, whatever its verisimilitude, gets hold of us as real at all. A skitter-bug is nothing to worry about, and there is no profit or fun either in a hero if you can't worry about him.

Mr. Kemble's Peter skitters from the outset. He is, we are to suppose, a good young Anglican parson, a brilliant preacher, affianced to a nice conventional English girl. The war comes; he is presently a chaplain in France; discovers that his religious formula is of no great account there; losing his formula, loses by degrees all his faith. He becomes enamored of a nurse from South Africa. She is a vulgar, flashy little thing, the shrieking flapper in her belated twenties. She loves indecent limericks and the coquetties of underwear and bibulous "parties" and sitting on young men's knees. Peter the puppy-padre adores her. And the sad thing is that a reader whose generation or tastes do not permit him to admire her can feel only contempt for the Peter who does. But, indeed, in the end we see that Peter is not really too good for her. His emotional welcome of a new religious faith, and the romantic sacrifice which Julie makes for him (after being voluptuously his week-end mistress at last) are equally therefore empty gestures. . . . For the rest, the reading of this book is thirsty work. From the moment when Peter dons his padre's uniform and steps on the train at Victoria Station to the moment when, cursing God for robbing him of Julie, he leaves her alone in a London hotel, he is more or less comfortably saturated with alcohol. Surely, for our reformed sakes, something should be done by the Volstead actors in connection with this sort of imported provocation.

"Adam and Caroline" is the second number of a trilogy or worse—the sequel of "Adam of Dublin" to our knowledge and the precursor of "Adam and Barbara" by the author's admission. As the first two volumes of Adam's story bring him no further than sixteen, there seems no reason why he should not in time expand to the now classic proportions of "Jean-Christophe." I did not see "Adam of Dublin," but it appears to have "covered" the first dozen years of Adam Byron O'Toole Dudley Wyndham Innocent Macfadden, an ill-gotten little guttersnipe with a strain of good blood in him. At twelve he is rescued from his immediate forebear, extremely disreputable persons, and becomes the ward of one Stephen Macarthy, an indubitable Irish gentleman, a man of learning and of sardonic wit. The mood in which he and his cronies are conceived recalls nothing so much as that of "Tristram Shandy," though there is not the remotest resemblance in manner. And at times the note of satire is nearer Swift than Sterne.

This is not a light book; there are many things in it for many men. But the Greek motto betrays its not hopeful animus. As the Anglican "padre" in "Simon Called Peter" sees at the end a flickering vision of safety in the bosom of Roman dogma, so conversely Adam, having lost belief in that dogma, finds himself adrift in a casual world. Between superstition and blasphemy he sees no middle way. We can only suspect that blasphemy will not have the last word with him. What I cannot patiently endure in this book is the brutal insensitiveness with which Adam meets the piteous end of Caroline. And I confess that the elaborate satirical affair of Mr. Tinkler and his play seems to me quite out of place, or at least out of proportion, in Adam's story. But there is (whatever there is, not) a fine careless play of humor and fancy and tenderness about the book as a whole, and I wouldn't have missed it for a wilderness of "Main Streets."

H. W. BOYNTON