

# BOOKS OF THE TIMES

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

“**A** SHREWD softie,” said one of a group at the table as she looked at the face of Tom Kromer, which is printed on the back of his “Waiting for Nothing” (Knopf, \$2). Well, Mr. Kromer, the young bindle stiff, was too soft to hold up a bank when he had a gat in his pocket, and he didn’t have the guts (his favorite word) to brain a prosperous-looking pedestrian on a dark street one night. As for shrewdness, he had the wit to set down the harrowing story of his five years on the bum, but if Lincoln Steffens had not come across Mr. Kromer, “Waiting for Nothing” would probably still be waiting for a publisher.

Mr. Kromer wrote his autobiographical novel on the backs of Bull Durham papers and on the margins of religious tracts that were passed out to him in mission flop houses. It is an unadorned narrative that for the most part records the lugubrious sameness of the stiff’s day, with waking hours spent begging for nickels for the elusive cup of coffee, and with nights spent shivering in the park, on the floor of a friend’s room or fighting off lice in the various flop houses. But every so often there is a scene in which naked terror wells up. For bindle stiff’s are sometimes ground to pieces under the whirring wheels of a freight, sometimes shot down by cops, sometimes hi-jacked by outlaw stiff’s, sometimes packed off to the calaboose for sixty days on the callous vagrancy charge. There is art in Mr. Kromer’s story; he knows when to space his searing story with unpleasant highlights in the life of the hunted.

### Warring Characteristics.

But the phrase “a shrewd softie” does him wrong. His face is one of warring characteristics; the five years of the depression are printed upon it. The chin and mouth taken together are stubborn, sullen and resentful (and why shouldn’t they be?). But the mouth and nose, taken together, are sensitive. The look about the eyes is both wistful and quizzical. And all this is extremely fortunate, humanly speaking. A lesser person than Tom Kromer would have been debauched and degraded by the experiences recorded in “Waiting for Nothing.” Mr. Kromer doesn’t look as if the depression had “hardened his fiber,” to use that egregiously idiotic phrase of editorial writers who have looked for the silver lining ever since 1929. But you can’t get hard on mission slops, on moldy carrots, on gruel, on stale bread, on coffee mixed with chicory and saltpeter. As Mr. Kromer would put it, a bindle stiff can’t look like Glenn Cunningham or Gene Tunney. You’ve got to have three hot squares a day and a warm flop at night for that. And you wouldn’t expect a bindle stiff to look like Charlie Schwab, either.

Mr. Kromer comes from Huntington, W. Va.

The incidents in “Waiting for Nothing” parallel, to some extent, the incidents in Edward Newhouse’s “You Can’t Sleep Here.” And to some extent, they are the modern equivalent of the incidents recorded by Jack London in his tramp stories of thirty years ago. American stiff’s have a literary tradition behind them. But Mr. Kromer’s prose is his own. It is a hungry prose, with an iterativeness that grinds into the reader the stiff’s natural resentment at restaurant proprietors who are chary with their stale cocoanut pies. No single stiff can stop to be philosophic with his backbone almost showing through his stomach. The fact that a restaurant proprietor, if he made a practice of feeding the unemployed, would soon be in the breadline himself, cannot stop the adrenalin of a disappointed hungry man from flaring up into curses when he is turned away.

### The High Spots.

The high points of Mr. Kromer’s novel are the scene in the park, when Mrs. Carter offers him four bits for a meal; the death of the young bindle stiff as he misses the freight and slips between the cars; the death of the old stiff in the mission flop house; the fiasco in the bank, when the hold-up fails; the lesson in “dummy-chucking,” which is stiff language for planting a doughnut on the curb and then waiting for some woman to come along before diving for it and devouring it in the hopes of evoking pity (and cash). But every line of the story has the savor of Mr. Kromer’s personality. Reading his book, I kept thinking of the eyes of one of those sad-faced hunting dogs. Mr. Marx was right; revolutions never will be made by the “lumpen proletariat.” To have “guts,” you’ve got to have something solid by way of food between your ribs.

Perspective is a luxury for those who can afford it. And Jessica Nelson North, associate editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, can afford to take a long view of the depression in “Arden Acres” (Harcourt, Brace, \$2) that would sound silly and untrue coming from a Tom Kromer. Superficially considered, “Arden Acres” reminds one of Victoria Lincoln’s “February Hill,” although it was already completed before Miss Lincoln’s novel reached the market. As in “February Hill,” there is a poor family living in a shack. There is an aged but sprightly grandma. There is a youthful mother who manages to have a good time. And there is a daughter who likes to wander around the countryside—although Arden Acres is not, strictly speaking, “country,” but, rather, a real estate development fifty miles from Chicago’s Loop.

### Not Mad Enough.

More realistic than “February Hill,” and with

Before he was 23 he had worked in a glass factory, had taught two years in mountain schools, had paid his way through three years of college by working as a proofreader at night. He left home five years ago for Kansas, hoping to make some money in the wheat harvest. But he found no job in Kansas, and he found no work elsewhere. At present he is working; with a novel to recommend him, he managed to get a job as a bookstore clerk in California. Any one who has undergone the experiences of "Waiting for Nothing" deserves a break, so one hopes that he is a good book salesman.

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more sense of the inevitable community life of the poor, "Arden Acres" still manages to retain a pleasantly anomalous flavor. But it is just realistic enough to give some point to doubts that Loretta, with five children, would have remained quite so young at 32; or to doubts that a nice young artist would come along to make the future bright for Joan. If one is going to create a truly fictitious world, the method of Miss Lincoln is the better. "February Hill" succeeds primarily because of its utterly mad comedy. "Arden Acres" is not quite so mad, and not quite so comic. Nor, on the other hand, is it true realism.

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