

MR. GUMBLE SITS UP by *Douglas Durkin* (LIVERIGHT. \$2.00)

SOMETHING of the calm attitude worn by the Philosophers in *The Crock of Gold* sits upon Mr. Gumble, of this story, like a weight, keeping him from doing the expected, and leavening his unreason with the semblance of sanity. Yet the reader knows all along that Mr. Gumble is not sane. Or perhaps it is merely that Mr. Gumble has been dead, and never having been in that state, the reader cannot judge the actions of one who has been. On the other hand, the author presumably has not been dead either; so how can he write convincingly of Mr. Gumble? The answer is that he cannot. Just what he is driving at through all this fantasy is hard to say. The reader never knows if Mr. Gumble, who sat up in his coffin and then proceeded on his way as a whole man, was really dead and came to life, or if the doctor who pronounced him deceased was mistaken. Whichever it was, Gumble considers that he was dead once, and thus not fearing death again, takes joyous and magnificent risk with his life, meeting death once more, with slightly different results.

There is in the account a certain amount of humor, but it is as vague as Mr. Gumble's post-mortem existence. It never attains that delightful foolery of the Philosophers' dissertations, yet the flavor is there, to tantalize with its inadaquacy. Various people reading the book will attempt to draw this and that inference from it, succeeding in accord with their own imaginations. The practical soul will be faintly amused and vastly puzzled.

MYRA M. WATERMAN

A NOTE IN MUSIC by *Rosamond Lehmann* (HOLT. \$2.50)

THERE was once a group of vacillating people. Frustration weighed heavily upon them like an albatross of the spirit, and ennui had set them by the heels. There was Norah whom

the war had rather defrauded, and Gerald, her unsocial, difficult husband. There was Grace, a strapping ungainly woman in middle life, whose husband Tom was golf-minded and mediocre, and Pansy, a girl of the town, who manicured by day and solicited by twilight.

Into their midst came Hugh, a beautiful and vaguely aphrodisiac young man who, quite unconscious of the sheep's eyes cast his way by the matrons and the trollop, concerned himself with a dogged and hopeless devotion for one Oliver, an Oxford esthete of dubious qualifications. With Hugh came his sister Clare, a sophisticated divorcee, who duplicated in the male bosoms the flutter Hugh inspired in the feminine dovescotes.

Nothing very terrific or important happened. The ladies yearned mightily after the gentleman, and the gentlemen flirted outrageously with the lady.

It is a far cry from the romantic striplings of *Dusty Answer* to the aging Lotharios of the present work. But this second novel logically complements the first in that it repeats the burthen with appropriate variations. The burning youthful question, "What of this life?", is again enunciated, albeit in the querulous tone of one who is more certain than ever that she will not be answered.

It is an unhappy book, full of unhappy people. Miss Lehmann's new characters approach love and life with the air of poor relations at a feast. Though hungry, they do not expect much, and they are charily served.

DOCTOR SEROCOLD by *Helen Ashton* (DOUBLEDAY, DORAN. \$2.50)

THOUGH today's triumph be tomorrow's pulpwood, it is not in nature for a reviewer to be fearful of enthusiasms. The journals of past, respected decades are populous with names that have gone without hope of resurrection into the disused and dingy limbo of a library file. Reviewed and reviewers alike are lapped in dust. Yet I surmise for Helen Ash-

ton's book a somewhat happier destiny, if only because it is a first-rate novel with first-rate and unusual subject matter. It details twenty-four hours in the life of an old-fashioned though young-spirited doctor, commencing at half-past two in the morning with the death of his friend and fellow-practitioner Doctor Gaunt, and ending long after midnight with a birth. Suspecting himself to be a victim of cancer, the Doctor gently watches his old partner out of the world, while his thoughts re-create their work together.

Encouraging, coaxing, bullying on occasion, Doctor Serocold makes his round, dropping into the homes of patients, working in the hospital theatre (where he performs a tricky, last-minute operation for mastoid), winning one's sympathy. It is this medical angle that affords the reader a new and stimulating experience. Throughout the day he is preoccupied with the fate of his friends, all of whom are hastening grave-ward, and with the similar early dissolution which he anticipates for himself. This dry pensiveness on a theme from *Koheleth* commences with the death motif struck in the first chapter, and continues to the last when the Doctor's problem is answered.

He has administered the anesthetic to the confined woman, and sits by the bedside, a little drowsy and confused:

"I've seen four generations today, wandering around; seen the whole of my life again, in a way. The lot that was here before me are dropping off now like falling leaves, and my own generation is running dry . . . there's not much more to be expected of us. And the generation in between are dead and buried. . . .

"But there's a new lot coming up to take our places, and not such a bad lot either. Here comes the last of the procession . . . a lively little beggar in spite of everything . . .

"If only they wouldn't keep one out of bed till such unconscionable hours. . . ."

LEO KENNEDY

SAINT JOHNSON by *W. R. Burnett* (DIAL PRESS. \$2.00)

It is a fashionable literary truism that even the wariest reader is often a willing victim of a tale in the well-fed tradition of hero versus villain with virtue emerging triumphant. Once equipped with this formula, a facile author has little else to do save construct a spectacular array of space-filling incidents against a moviesque background, with the added attraction of so-called realistic dialogue. But sometimes the cleverest journalese novelist oversteps himself. The simplicity of the pattern is deceptive. W. R. Burnett had the dubious fortune to stumble upon remarkably fertile and provocative material, and made the dismal mistake of trying to follow the familiar formula. Naturally the reader is justified in objecting to the sight of a potentially fascinating story being effectively strangled with the best-selling fingers of pathos, suspense, local color, and a sort of subdued theatricalism in style.

Wayt Johnson, his spartan brother Luther, and Brant White, a conventionally suave gambler of the early eighties in lawless Arizona, take upon themselves the dangerous and unsuccessful duty of impressing moral order upon a town controlled by cattle rustlers and knavish politicians. Wayt is known among the law-abiding element as "Law and Order Johnson", although the less puristic and more eloquent characters speak of him as "that long-legged, disconnected, Kansas son-of-a-bitch, Saint Johnson". Out of the thin thread of Johnson's experiences as officer in a barbaric mining camp, the author has endeavored to weave the strong fabric of a competent novel. His finished product is uneven and disappointing.

Founded upon authentic sources, *Saint Johnson* pretends to be an epic of the old frontier days, a vibrantly reminiscent story of the hard-riding, quick-shooting American southwest of fifty years ago. Nor has Mr. Burnett been niggardly in the use of local