A Young Hobo
F.F.K.
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A Young Hobo

WAITING FOR NOTHING. By Tom Kromer. 188 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. $2.

TOM KROMER is a young man whose home before the depression was in Huntington, W. Va. He is now 28 years old and for most of the time during the last five years he has been hoboing about over the United States, to Kansas, California, the East, round about and across the country. Once he spent fifteen months in a CCC camp and sometimes he has stayed several weeks in some town doing odd jobs as he could find them and perhaps earning enough to pay for a room and food. But most of these five years he has been a hobo, wandering homelessly and aimlessly, begging for food, living in "jungles," eating and sleeping in missions, jumping onto moving trains, shivering on the tops of freight cars or hiding inside them, sleeping on park benches.

The narrative, which is composed of detached incidents, seems to be representative of his life. There is no connection between the different chapters, although there is in the whole of it a suggestion of sequence, of the development of the story. Mr. Kromer says that it is strictly autobiographical; that, with the exception of four or five incidents, the events narrated in it all happened to him. So much of it is expressed in hobo slang that a reader unfamiliar with the patter of the road and the jungle must often guess at the meaning. But its short, stark, realistic sentences are weighted with a grim significance. He is wholly frank about his experiences, wholly without reticence, caring not what he does so that it will get him food and a cover of any sort from rain and snow and cold. He touches the lowest depths, and tells about it. He all but commits murder, but at the crucial moment finds it impossible to strike, not because of *fear but because something within* him revolts.

Now and then there is a touch of grim, ghastly humor. In every one of the chapters there is drama, brief, but tragic, or comic, or pathetic. And for the reader the story is all shot through with horror that any human being should have to endure such experiences, even if one does feel sure that they are due more to some failure or flaw in him than to economic conditions. Frequently the author seems to exploit an idea, or emotion, or situation a little too much, to devote to it one or two more of his short, gripping, terrible sentences than it needs to carry its full weight of significance. But the sheer power of the ghastliness and horror of the narrative carries one on so rapidly that this does not seem to matter. Telling of the death of one of his underworld tramp companions in a mission dormitory, he goes on thinking about it:

> I look over at this stiff's empty bunk. Dead in an hour! I shiver. Great Christ, I think, is this the way I will go out too? It is hard enough to pass out in a nice feather bed with all your family gathered around and crying. It is no snap to die like that. But this way. Lying up on top of a three-decker bunk. No mattress under you. Only a dirty blanket. Lie here and rattle and groan. Lie here and feel the lice crawling all over you. * * * It will get me too like it got this guy. It is getting me. * * * I lie up here on my three-decker bunk and shiver. I am not cold. I am afraid. What is a man to do?

No, it is not a pretty narrative. It brings out into the daylight some of the ugliest, ghastliest, most revolting and most puzzling features in our civilization and makes them demand attention. But uglier and more revolting than these material things is its evidence of how easily the human spirit can sink into such depths of degradation; of how degraded it can become.

F. F. K.