

Books: Meet Uncle Tom

By Grace Isabel Colbron

In one of his stories Kipling says: "Truth is a naked lady, and if by accident she should be drawn up from the bottom of the sea, it behooves a gentleman either to give her a print petticoat or turn his face to the wall and pretend he did not see."

The present generation may not act that way about "naked ladies" but much of it still does act that way about unpleasant truths. And one unpleasant truth about great areas of our own country is still treated only in the print petticoat of easily forgotten magazine articles and fiction. Facts about the "Share-Croppers" in the southern cotton belt are slowly coming to light. And two new books, both fiction, have treated this question in a way that ought to arouse general interest.

Henry Harrison Kroll's "I Was a Share-cropper" (Bobbs-Merrill, \$2.75) is autobiography, wonderfully well written and well worth reading just as a picture of life in some parts of this great country, the "land of unlimited opportunity." The author grew up in a family of share-croppers and escaped into better conditions through his own energy.

His story offers no argument for or against that cruel form of landlordism under which his childhood suffered. In fact, at the last he hints that he considers his family and the others a bit shiftless and their troubles are more or less their own fault. But because of its very sincerity in the painting of the picture, what Mr. Kroll has to tell will bear its own message for the intelligent reader, who may in the end disagree with the author's conclusion but cannot forget the facts portrayed.

Charlie May Simon's "The Share-cropper" (Dutton, \$2.50) is a horse of another color. Cast in the form of a novel, depicting the fortunes of one sympathetic family, the book is a red-hot indictment against the conditions described. Simple in style, straightforward in narrative, the book interests as a story of the lives of

its leading characters, but at the same time it leaves one glowing with indignation that such things could be.

Miss Simon does not preach, but it is evident that she does not think the share-cropper's trials are due entirely to shiftlessness on his part. We see several men with ability, with hopes of better things, ground down to helplessness, and hopelessness which is worse, under the conditions of this American form of peonage, which seems to embody all the evils of feudalism and chattel slavery without any of their saving graces.

The book begins with the marriage of Bill Bradley to Donie Goodwin. They are both fine young folks, strong, hard-working, honest and upright. In the varying fortunes of their lives we see what "share-cropping" means. They are among the best workers on the plantation, but at the end of the harvest season Bill finds that what with the prices, the 10 per cent interest on his grubstake at the commissary store and the landlord's extra deductions beyond what was arranged he has only a few dollars coming to him when, as is more common, he does not find himself in debt to the store and the landlord.

Credit is not given during the non-working season; the family lives on meal and molasses when they have any. Each year Bill and Donie hope they may lay something aside to buy a mule, because folks who have mules work on three-fourth shares, not just one-half. But each year when the "statement" is made out by the plantation owner and store keeper, there is little if any cash coming to Bill and usually he is in debt.

The "contract" as given to Bill when he moves to another plantation is a model of a trap to catch the simple mind. These people are caught in a trap and it is not of their own fault, Miss Simon seeks to show. When nature unloads calamity on them, as in the case of a great river

flood, wonderfully described, things are really a bit better for them, because then "charity" comes in and helps. But Bill does not want charity, except in such unusual emergencies.

And an interesting fact, saddest of all is his lot when the New Deal steps into the picture. However well-meaning the new ideas that go out from Washington, this book shows clearly how, in the end, it is always the landlord who profits. He gets paid for the acres plowed under—and the share-cropper, getting less work, naturally gets less than even his usual low wages. The chapters that show conditions on the plantation under the new agricultural laws are exceedingly enlightening.

And the story of the share-croppers' revolt, led by a young lawyer who through meeting Bill Bradley in flood relief work learns something of conditions, is as interesting as anything in the book. Particularly as we know that through this revolt, actual and authentic as described, the rest of the world is learning something about the share-cropper, the American peon.

This is a book no student of the social sciences, no matter how wedded he may be to more objective works in the non-fiction field, should miss. Miss Simon's book gives rich coloring to the black and white picture the agronomist and the sociologist have already etched.

See: "Progress and Poverty," pp. 347-357.