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As It Was

COMPANY K. By WILLIAM MARCH. New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Haas. 1933. \$2.

Reviewed by ARTHUR RUHL

MR. MARCH, himself a veteran who served with distinction overseas, has hit on the effective idea of writing his war "novel" in a series of very brief sketches, each of the 113 of which carries the name of one of the members of "Company K." Each tells his experience in the first person, character is implicit in dialogue and action, and occasional cross-lights are cast by having the same episode viewed by contrasting characters in succession. There is no further direct continuity between the various episodes, but there is a rough sequence of time, and the tabloid dramas, most of them little more than a page in length and some even shorter than that, follow the rising and descending curve of emotion from the American training-camp through the months of active fighting and back home again.

The outstanding virtues of Mr. March's work are those of complete absence of sentimentality and routine romanticism, of a dramatic gift constantly heightened and sharpened by the eloquence of understatement. Your first impression is that of the ultimate "low-down." Here is the thing as it was, as the man in the ranks saw it, modern war and the dumb cattle sucked into its vortex, without a touch of prettifying or falsity.

One can't help speculating on the sensation this book would have made had it appeared in the early '20's, before "What Price Glory," "All Quiet" and all the rest of the anti-war literature and drama. It is easier now to write such a book. The public mind has been prepared, is ready to meet it more than half way.

The author is under no necessity to overcome initial prejudice, to waste steam on non-essentials. He can throw away all impedimenta and drive straight for his objective—that of making modern war seem utterly bestial and futile. Granting this atmospheric change and its implications, Mr. March has nevertheless written an extraordinarily moving and an important book—one that deserves a place with the best of its kind.

A second, less favorable, impression follows, not unnaturally, from the very

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advantages just mentioned. The author's freedom, that is to say, to pile horror on horror, cynicism on cynicism, ends by leaving one with a sense of that "too much" which defeats itself. Of routine romanticism there is, indeed, no trace; but the continuous heaping up of bitterness and irony without any of the compensatory elements which were there, also, in life results in a sort of reverse-romanticism, so to say, in an overemphasis which is also false.

One could point out specific instances as well as the general tendency. That story of the American runner who killed a lone German in the wood, shot him twice, ran his bayonet up under the chin, through the roof of the man's mouth and into his brain, and then couldn't pull his bayonet out, even after he put his hob-nailed boot on the dead man's face, and tugged and stamped, gouging some of the man's face away, is an example. The hob-nails, coming on page 249, after all that has gone before, are just the straw too much. We feel that the author is "riding" us a bit, just as that infuriating Captain Matlock ("Fishmouth Terry") "rode" his long-suffering men.

The author's occasional practice of permitting characters to describe the events leading up to their own deaths, even including the final shot itself, seems of doubtful technique, and there is one curious instance of a character being killed, apparently, on page 157, only to turn up big as life again after the war toward the end of the book. But such technical slips, if they are slips, are trifling in the presence of so much that is fresh, authentic, and absolutely the real, right thing. The more horrible episodes, including that of the shooting of the prisoners, had best be left to be read, but one can't forbear quoting that curiously characteristic bit of "dumb" humor from the trenches before Verdun.

The sector was so quiet that you wouldn't have known there was anybody out ahead at all. Only a rocket and the sputter of a machine-gun, now and then, and after a while, further down the trench, another rocket and a dozen more machine-gun bullets to go with it.

The boys made up a story that there wasn't anybody in front of us except an old man, who rode a bicycle, and his wooden-legged wife. The man would ride down the duckboards, with his wife running behind him carrying the machine-gun. Then the man would stop and send up a rocket, while the old woman fired the gun. After that they started all over, and kept it up all night.

The boys talked about the old German, and his wife with the wooden leg, until, after a while, everybody began to believe they were actually there.

"It's just like a German to make his wife run behind him and carry the heavy gun," said Emile Ayres one night. "They beat their wives, too, I've heard it said."

"That's a lie!" said Jakie Brauer, whose mother and father were both born in Germany. "Germans are as good to their wives as Americans, or anybody else!"

"Then why don't he carry the gun sometime?" Emile asked; "why don't he carry the gun and let the old woman ride on the bicycle?"