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Creators: Merz, Charles A.

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THE BOOKSHELF

THE GREAT AMERICAN BAND-WAGON

By Charles A. Merz

Unlike the great H. L. Mencken, the author of this book is content with merely pointing out the foibles of the American people. The pioneer in this field of literature is undoubtedly the first-mentioned gentleman. He, however, caused himself to become unpopular with the majority because he insisted on poking fun at our cherished customs and manners. Author Merz takes a neutral stand and is content with just pointing out our peculiarities. Mencken is without doubt the braver of the two, but Merz shows better judgment.

If we are to believe this author, our great *penchant* for dashing about the countryside in automobiles is due to the old pioneering instinct. To be more explicit and to cite an example, old man Crabtree of the Massachusetts Bay Colony back in 1745 found life too humdrum. Accordingly, he packed up his Lares and Penates and departed for the then wilds of western Pennsylvania. There he cleared land and established himself. His son, however, was not content. He trekked on to Ohio as soon as he could raise enough cash. Later, the son of the Ohio Crabtree trekked on to Missouri. Things went on like this for nearly two centuries, until one day found the newest branch of the Crabtrees settled in sunny California. Things had now reached a stage where further pioneering was impossible unless the Crabtrees desired to colonize in the Orient. Now, according to Mr. Merz, the old desire to pioneer and colonize in new territory lingers in the veins of every American. Since we cannot pack up and settle in some outpost we content ourselves with aimless touring. Mr. Merz may be correct in what he says, but we call it pure fiction made to fill the pages of a book.

Author Merz takes great delight in pulling apart and analyzing the fraternal spirit of America. Why do we band together as Elks, Woodmen, Masons, Moose, Eagles, Odd Fellows, Pythians, etcetera? His answer is that we long to satisfy a childish desire to dress up and speak a piece. We fear that some dark night a hooded group is going to spirit Mr. Merz away for his unwarranted calumny.

His chapter on the tabloid is the only one in the book that merits praise. Only in this chapter does he set forth sane discourse.

Hot dogs, chocolate bars, filling stations, tabloids—that, says the author, is the essence of America. The citizens of this country have been repeatedly told how low their standards are. Personally, we venture the statement that if a critical study similar to this one were made of any nation it would yield a similar conclusion.

RED PANTS

By Captain John W. Thomason, Jr.

Those who delight in reading about the war and things connected with it ought to enjoy this collection of short stories. The author's succinct style goes well with this type of literature, for terseness is companion to things military.

The redoubtable marines, the group that says

If the Army and the Navy
Ever win to Heaven's scenes,
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines . . .

occupy the center of attraction in this collection as they do in the author's first effort, *Fix Bayonets!* For once, the valor of the Leathernecks is soft-pedaled. This is rather surprising because the author himself is one. Perhaps modesty forbids the usual blatant praise. We personally have no grudge against the Marine Corps but feel, as do many others, that they are played up too much. One never hears of the Gobs or the Regulars in the movies or current literature, but a "super-film" featuring the Soldiers of the Sea is sure to make an appearance at least twice a year. Then, of course, Captain Thomason does his share of bouquet-tossing. Someone has said, and truthfully too, that the only difference between the Marines and the other branches of the service is that the former has a better advertising department.

The first story in the book, and the one from which it gets its name, does not particularly concern the Marine Corps. It is about a Galveston darky stevedore who gets stranded in France. Because he admires and covets the French Colonial uniform, he joins a regiment of Sengalese. He secures his red pantaloons, as well as a great deal more action than he expected. This tale rates a capital A.

Inside information on Latin-American politics, particularly revolutions, is the keynote of "Ambush" and "A Soldier of Liberty." The are quite apropos of the recent Nicaraguan incident as they concern that country in particular.

"The Marines Have Landed" relates the encounter of a Marine sergeant with a New York gunman. A better title, we think, would have been "A Leather Meets a Roughneck." This story is not bad, either.

The author's themes are well-chosen and show a knowledge of subject, but his style lacks the tang of originality. One feels that Kipling and O. Henry collaborated on a group of short stories and then called in a Marine to furnish local color. Nevertheless, Captain Thomason deserves praise for his work. The stories are interesting and brimming with virility. His numerous pen-and-pencil sketches enhance the vividness of his yarns.

PIRATES: OLD AND NEW

By Charles Gollomb

For a pleasant diversion in reading there is nothing to compare with a good pirate story. For a pleasant diversion in pirate stories there is nothing to compare with Mr. Gollomb's latest.

As the author of *Master Man Hunters*, Mr. Gollomb opened a new method in writing biography. He has carried this style over to this book which makes it doubly entertaining. He has the habit of injecting current colloquialisms and expressions which add a rare piquancy to his writing.

There is no pirate fancier who has not adopted

the swashbuckling Captain Morgan as his very own. This freebooter is readily conceded by all the prize niche in the sea-rover's Hall of Fame for his audacious sacking of Puerto Bello and Panama in the heyday of the Spanish régime in the New World. The amazing effrontery of this buccaneer may be realized when we say that Panama was the most powerful stronghold of the Spaniard in this hemisphere. Captain Morgan had the insolence to attempt to capture the town; the amazing thing is that he did capture it.

You will enjoy reading "The Captured Thunderbolt." It is the first story in the collection and one of the best. The action takes place in the time of the Romans on the Mediterranean Sea. It holds a great surprise.

One of the cleverest pieces of roguery in English criminal annals is recounted in "He Stole a Steamboat." We respectfully suggest this story to the reigning moguls of Hollywood as the basis of an excellent cinema plot.

Mr. Nordquist did some fine work on the woodcuts used in illustrating this book. We rarely mention illustrations but this is a warranted occasion.

THE GREENE MURDER CASE

By S. S. Van Dine

A current magazine gives a very interesting account of the author of this book. S. S. Van Dine, it appears, is a *nom de plume* which the author has assumed for fear of compromising his high position in other fields of literature. He claims that he is the author of several books on abstract subjects as well as being a recognized critic of art and literature. By "recognized" we mean a critic whose opinion is eagerly sought after. A liberal education in this country and abroad is the scholastic background of this mysterious writer.

It is surprising, then, that a scholar of this type should stoop to the lowly murder yarn. Mr. Van Dine accounts for this in a convincing manner. During his recovery from a nervous breakdown he was allowed to read only light fiction. He spurned, as do most learned men, the mushy romance. There remained only the mystery story, so he devoured all he could lay hands on. His massive intellect was arrested by the questioning thought of what constituted the underlying principle on which the "good" murder or mystery story was based. Like a great scholar and investigator he did the job in a scientific manner. He read every mystery story that he and his book dealer could lay hands on. Being a student of foreign languages he imported French and German thrillers. After wading through this gruesome mass of 20,000 mystery stories in three languages, Mr. Van Dine may be readily conceded the honor of having read more crime tales than any man alive.

He kept notes while reading these stories and finally evolved his construction of the mystery story. The popularity of his first mystery story, *The Canary Murder Case*, proved he had the right idea. His second, *The Benson Murder Case*, was even a better seller. The book being reviewed has surpassed the sales of the first two put together. The author has decided to complete a set of six tales and then retire from the murder business and return to his philosophical and pro-

fessional critique. The lure of the lucre, it appears, holds this scholar to the writing of thrillers.

Mr. Van Dine has demonstrated that when an educated man turns his interest to some subject and applies his learning, he will turn out a better piece of work than his less educated co-worker. This author has undoubtedly opened up a new era in this type of literature. The reading public is demanding more in their mystery stories — not more thrills but more sense.

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Mussolini seems to have forsaken his dictatorship for writing. Following close on the heels of his *Saturday Evening Post* debut comes Scribner's announcement of the publication *My Autobiography* by Italy's man of iron.

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A new publishing house has been launched in the wheat belt by a group of Minneapolis business men. Their provoking announcement is to the effect that they will publish only clean, wholesome literature.

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Ireland, long known as the home of potatoes and policemen, is coming into the limelight as a sportsman's haven. President Cosgrave started the ball rolling several months ago when he spoke over the radio during his stay in New York about Ireland as a happy hunting ground. Now the house of Longmans, Green announce a book by one Major John W. Seigne concerning Ireland as a vacation spot. It appears that salmon fishing is the favorite sport.

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Apropos of our review of *The Greene Murder Case* is the publication of S. S. Van Dine's latest, *The Bishop Murder Case*. It is also being published in a current magazine.

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Another outline, this time *The Outline of Man's Knowledge*, has put in appearance. Some enterprising writer ought to make an Outline of Outlines. That is not an original quip but it is nevertheless quite pertinent.

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That entertaining author, Jeffrey Farnol, has completed a new novel, *Guyfford of Weare*. Mr. Farnol's specialty is Merrie England in the old days.

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Roamin' in the Gloamin', the life story of the man who made the Scotch famous, Sir Harry Lauder, is now in book form.

A CHILD'S WISDOM

Three children were playing a new game called "trial and murder."

Little Johnnie, the ringleader, was assigning the parts.

"I'll be the murderer," he said, "and you, Tommy, can be the man that gets killed. Jane can be his wife. But how about Sarah? She's too little to know anything. Oh, I know, she can be the jury."—*Life*.