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Ohio State Engineer

Title: The Bookshelf Speaks

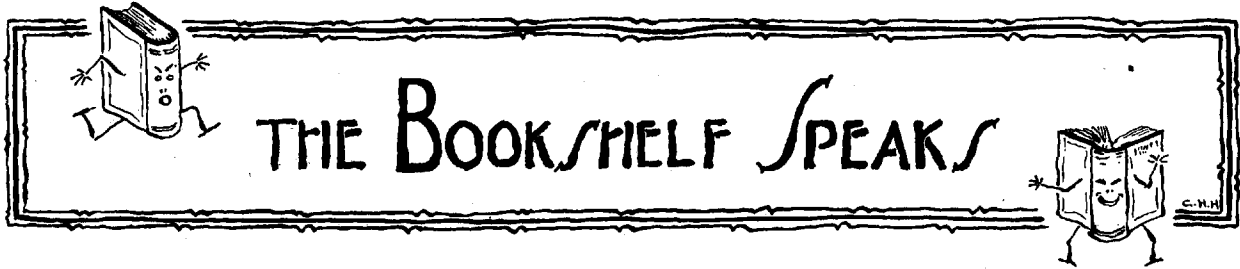
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"How big is my baby?" Selina would demand, "How big is my man?" Then little Dirk DeJong, standing before his mother would stretch his arms wide and squeal, "So-o-oo Big!" After he grew to be one of the most correct young men of Chicago's fashionable North Shore, having forsaken an architectural career to become a successful bond salesman, he returned to his apartment one night after visiting his mother, and questioned himself again: "How big?" His answer makes the story of a book which, although it has been out for almost a year, is still a best seller.

The Bookman publishes a monthly score tabulating the books most called for at the libraries during a preceding month. Almost since its appearance "So Big" by Edna Ferber has scored among the first four books and for several months was the most "called-for" bit of modern fiction in America. My copy bore upon the cover, "145th Thousand." A week later I saw another copy whose red cover screamed "155th Thousand." It is slyly gratifying to find so good a book receiving so much popularity.

For "So Big" is good. Miss Ferber writes with a richness of expression that rivets the attention. Her style runs to short sentences often incomplete, vibrant with an energy that lends to silent reading all the inflections of declamation. This dramatic quality coupled with her ability, sometimes labored, of finding the unusual expression, make "So Big" good reading: the story makes it easy reading.

In marked stylistic contrast is "Lord Jim," by the late Joseph Conrad. This seems to be the leisure product of an unhurriable man. Everything moves smoothly in Conrad, never an incomplete sentence, never an effort for sensationalism, just plain words mixed by a master, a splendid object lesson for the young 'moderns' who strive for the unusual until their work shows only the striving.

So, as an antidote for the first book mentioned, let me recommend "Lord Jim." The story is a plain one, simply the losing and finding at sea of a young man's self respect. You may even think it moves too slowly, but don't fail to give "Lord Jim" a try. It's immensely worth while.

Did you ever have someone just pester you with a book until you dodged every time you saw him? So'd I. Even thought I was safe when I got home for the holidays, but along came the mailman bearing a massive volume—"From Immigrant to Inventor," by Michael Pupin. I didn't want to read an autobiography,—too egotistical and dull,—but just for spite I'd see what it was all about. . . . When I came to I'd missed my dinner!

Perhaps the most startling thing about "From Immigrant to Inventor" is that it could have been written by

an engineer. It is first of all a delightful narrative, the interesting story of an interesting man. Secondly it is a glowing account of Americanization. We who become sophisticated and accustomed to smiling indulgently at exhibitions of patriotism can get a real thrill out of this account of the growth of American ideals in the heart of an immigrant. To them the Declaration of Independence was signed last week and its message still a quivering one. Last of all the book is a terse story of the growth of modern science. One must remember that the science of electricity was born after our Declaration of Independence. The pioneers of that science, the men for whom we name physical laws now—Maxwell, Tyndall, Faraday, Helmholtz and others,—these were the men the Pupin had for teachers. One might be more specific and call this a story of the growth of idealism in American science, since Pupin reflects through his own Americanization the influence of Continental scientists upon our own.

Somewhat less seriously let me mention two very clever books which came to my attention over the holidays, to wit,—one "Antic Hay" by Aldous Huxley and "The Tattooed Countess" by Carl Van Vechten. You will finish the first, if indeed you finish it at all, with an unsatisfied craving to know what it was about and the definite suspicion that you have just read something very subtly humorous. The second is noted, and rightly, for its faithful delineation of the period of the nineties, flavored by the fragile humor that has already endeared Van Vechten to those who delight in cleverness.

This would not be complete without mentioning "The Miracle." Together with the friend who pestered me with "From Immigrant to Inventor" ye humble Bookshelf daycoached up to Cleveland expecting to be deeply impressed. It was no disappointment! The plot of the play is simple: A nun flees from her convent and the cathedral with a knight. In her absence the Image of the Madonna comes to life and for seven years carries out the fugitive sister's duties. During this time, first the knight and then three successive lovers are killed, until at last the nun, brokenhearted, returns to the cathedral on a Christmas night. She finds the Madonna back on the pedestal, image again, and everything else as she left it. She dons her vestments and as the crowd throngs into the cathedral with hands held high in thanksgiving for the return of the image of the Madonna, the nun sees upon the Madonna's face a smile of forgiveness for her own call to motherhood. The play is rich in episodes that afford the most elaborate of staging, and, Ziegfeld and Earl Carrol to the contrary notwithstanding, "The Miracle" is probably the most pretentious stage production ever offered in America.