

## The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

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# THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

**THE SEA OF GRASS**—by Conrad Richter. Knopf. \$1.25

**BRIEF CASE**—by Christopher Morley. Lippincott. 25 cents

**HIGH TOR**—by Maxwell Anderson. Anderson House. \$2.50.

## The Sea of Grass

At last, at long last, I have discovered a book that I think belongs on the same shelf with two volumes I prize very highly. I firmly believe that *The Sea of Grass* by Conrad Richter should go side by side with *The Lost Lady* by Willa S. Cather and *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton. For some time I have been looking for such a volume; for some time, now, I have been trying to locate a novelette which, when placed under the literary microscope will do justice to that lovely story about Mrs. Forrester and that sturdy tale of New England's stalwart Ethan. And at last I have found it.

*The Sea of Grass* is a relentless story of pure devotion against the New Mexico background of seventy-five years ago, when the waving prairie grass was colored with milling cattle and when old Colonel Brewton could stand on the porch of his ranch house and count the acres of his land for a hundred miles in all four directions. It is the supreme tale of love and hate; love for the one woman who came into the Colonel's life and hate for the nesters encroaching on his land to plough and to furrow and to disturb the quiet of a peace we often wish for and rarely find. It is the tale of the devotion of a mother, who, after years of desertion travels back to the gossipy little town, to attend the funeral rites of a son whose father was not the man to whom she was married. It is the tale of the Colonel himself, fine, noble, pioneering stock, who, in failure, discovered victory.

And all of these threads are woven through the eyes of a growing boy, first in his teens, then during his undergraduate years, and later as a young and struggling physician in the little town. It is he who meets the train the day that Lutie arrives in Salt Fork to marry the Colonel. It is he who watches the ranch house transformed into a home after the wedding; who hangs around the fringe of the gay crowds that gather there; who sees the two young sons grow up to early manhood; who listens to the confidences of Lutie when she plans to run away to the city; who follows her to the old Brown Palace Hotel in Denver with one thousand dollars in greenbacks. It is he, Hal, the narrator of the story, who rides fifty miles on horseback to bind up the wounds of the blond son Brock, mortally injured in a gambling dive. And it is

Hal to whom Lutie goes when, after fifteen years of absence she returns to Salt Fork to attend Brock's funeral. Where she had been, no one knew, not even the Colonel. She did not explain; she did not have to.

In the hundred and fifty short pages of *The Sea of Grass*, I believe, is a greater and more moving story than in the fifteen hundred odd pages of more famous novels that are now and have been best sellers in the book stalls the last few years. *The Sea of Grass* is an unbelievably beautiful and moving story of a section of pioneering America little touched on by our writers today.

## Brief Case

Several weeks ago a friend presented me with a copy of Christopher Morley's *Brief Case*, a little paper-bound book with a collection of the most delightful essays in it. Beside the essays there is some poetry, but the essays are best feature of the edition. I like in particular the very first one, *Dowager of the Sea*, a splendid and vivid account of the docking of the *Queen Mary* on her first trip into New York harbor. I had read it before, in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, I believe, but I still like to sit down and try to figure out on paper just how that little *Alice B. Moran*, flagship of the tug boats, noses the *Queen of the Seas* into her Manhattan slip. I suppose it recalls the many times I have stood at the Battery in New York, and in the clear morning light have seen those slick black and white liners, their red funnels just even with the horizon, skim slowly past Staten Island, up the North River, and quietly slip into their berth.

There is all of this, and more too, in Morley's *Brief Case*.

## The Plough, The Stars

From time to time Hollywood produces a picture of exceptional merit, and when that happens I feel the occasion for cheering is at hand. That occasion, I believe, was the production of *The Plough and the Stars*, a cinema version of Sean O'Casey's play by the same name. It tells the story of the struggle for Irish freedom, the story of the love between Nora and Jack Clitheroe against a background of the Easter Sunday 1916 uprising undertaken by the Sinn Fein and the Citizen Army. On that day, it must be remembered, some two thousand citizens took possession of the public buildings in Dublin and proclaimed a Republic, with a provisional government headed by Padriac Pearse. In a week's time the British forces put down the rebellion, the British losing about four hundred men and the Irish losses well over a thousand.

Fifteen of the leaders were put to death and several thousand persons were arrested for complicity. The ultimate result of the uprising, however, was the present freedom of Ireland.

Against this background is woven the story of the Clitheroes, and one gets a vivid view of the streets of Dublin in 1915, where sympathy with the common people and the poor and the unfortunate is established. One discovers the intimate, human relationships which exist in the semi-slum section of the city; and slowly the story of Nora's love for Jack is graphically punctuated with rifle volleys and rearing horses and the rat-tat of machine gun fire.

Of course Jack returns to his Nora, but the return is staged under the most trying circumstances, and he is saved only by placing his military accoutrements in the coffin of the dead neighbor child while her wake is in progress in the attic of the tenement house. I liked particularly the words of *The Covey*: "There is no such thing as an Irishman or an Englishman or a German or a Turk. We're all only human beings." And there was Jack's statement: "What they said with their blood won't die," certainly symbolized by the music and the bells at the very end of the production.

O'Casey, the author of the play from which the picture was made, took part in the 1916 uprising, and most naturally the expressions of the picture are written with the deepest sympathy. After the production of the play in 1926 it was selected as one of the best ten plays of that year, and won deserved success both in Ireland and in this country. O'Casey is also author of another famous drama, *Juno and the Paycock*.

Surely a word must be said about the direction of *The Plough and the Stars*; it was handled by John Ford, who only adds another success to his already distinguished list of cinema attempts. It was he, you remember, who gave us *The Informer*, *The Prisoner of Shark Island*, and *Arrowsmith*.

## Dreams Come True

A number of weeks ago I had occasion to mention to one of my English classes something about Roger Bacon, that thirteenth century savant, and his prognostication of the machine age. I realized at the time that I was rather vague on the subject as it had been quite a few years since I had read Bacon; so I set out to see if I could locate those few paragraphs in which Sir Roger proceeded to "relate the works of art and miracles of nature." I discovered them in the April, 1934, issue of *Golden Book*, and believing that others, too, might be interested I reprint them here.

From *Epistola de Secretis*, published in 1268, Roger Bacon said:

"I will now proceed to relate the works of art and miracles of nature, wherein there is nothing magical; nay rather, all magical power would seem inferior to such works, and unworthy of them.

"And first I will discourse through the figure and reason of art alone. For vessels might be made to move

without oars or rowers, so that ships of great size might move on sea or on river, at the governance of a single man, more swiftly than if they were strongly manned. Moreover, chariots might be made to move without animal impulse at an incalculable speed; such as we suppose those scythed chariots to have been wherewith men were wont to fight in ancient days. Again, flying instruments might be made, so that a man might sit in the midst thereof, turning a certain machine whereby wings of artful composition should beat the air, after the fashion of a bird in her flight.

"Another instrument might be made, of small size, to raise or to lower weights of almost infinite greatness; than which nothing could be more useful in certain cases. For, by means of an instrument of the height and breadth of three fingers, and less bulk than they, a man might free himself and his companions from all peril of prison, lifting them and lowering them again. Moreover, an instrument might easily be made whereby one man could violently draw a thousand men to himself against their will, and so also of the attraction of other things.

"Again, instruments might be made for walking in the sea, or in rivers, even to the very bottom, without bodily danger. . . . For these things were done of old, and have certainly also been done in our own times; except possibly the flying machine, which I have never seen, nor have I met any man who hath seen it; but I know a wise man who hath excogitated this artifice. And almost innumerable things of this kind might be made; bridges over rivers without pier or prop whatsoever, and unheard of machines and engines."

## High Tor

Maxwell Anderson, whose *The Wingless Victory* was reviewed on these pages last issue, has published, since then, another play which is running concurrently on Broadway. It is called *High Tor*, and although not as good reading as *The Wingless Victory*, affords a delightful two hours of perusal. *High Tor* takes its name from a piece of land which overlooks the Hudson river in the vicinity of West Point. Young Van Van Dorn has inherited this bit of mountain country and loves it with a passion almost unbelievable. He is besieged by New York realtors who wish to buy it in order to convert it into lots; and he also is pestered by the officials of a stone quarry which adjoins the property to dispose of it in order to enlarge their stone interests. In their wanderings about High Tor, the realtors and the quarry officials and Van Dorn with his family, meets the most delightful assortment of ghosts and gunmen, phantoms of a Dutch crew who lost their ship three hundred years ago when Hendrik Hudson sailed up the river. They still are waiting on the Van Dorn mountain for their ship to carry them back to Amsterdam. It all makes interesting reading, and although not as compelling a story as *Winter-set* nor as dramatic a theme as *The Wingless Victory*, *High Tor* has charm and freedom and originality all its own. In other words, it is "right smart good spoofing," and all of it written in delightful blank verse.