

The Library Page

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TWELVE MEN

By Theodore Dreiser

Reviewed by R. L. Herbert

Theodore Dreiser has been the object of probably more uncomplimentary and unflattering comments than any contemporary writer with the possible exceptions of H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, both of whom have accomplished more than Dreiser and have therefore drawn a greater amount of adverse criticism from the critics; literary and pseudo-literary.

"Dreiser is a man with a bad taste in his mouth and a style of bad grammar in which to express it," an early English instructor of mine once said. Later he added, "Too much of Dreiser will make you sick. Only vomiting will bring relief."

But if this is Dreiser, and I heartily agreed when I had braved the introductory pages of his voluminous *American Tragedy*, we have a slightly different Dreiser in *Twelve Men*. The absence of radicalism and other Dreiserian characteristics gave me one of the greatest surprises I have experienced in recent reading. The bad taste is, for the most part, missing but the bad grammar is always present.

Twelve Men is a book of sketches, presenting twelve men whom, with possibly one or two exceptions, we would all delight in knowing. Certainly, if they are in real life as Dreiser pictures them in his book, they would be interesting and valuable acquaintances for anyone.

Each character in the book is evidently a man whom Dreiser has known during his life, and at least the majority of them are actual persons; men who, because of some unique characteristic, attracted Dreiser's attention. Each of them is a man who is prompted by the Dreiserian theory, "Do whatever instinct and desire prompt."

It is men of this type who interest Dreiser, and from reading the sketches one would come to the conclusion that it is only men of this type who are worthwhile. Dreiser is a confirmed and confessed enemy of conventions, and evidently an advocate of Butler's theory that the only way to live is to enjoy life. Butler and Dreiser could probably have been friends had they lived at the same time and in the same country, although Butler would have been amused and often irritated at many of Dreiser's sophomoric ideas and whims.

Probably the best of the sketches in the book is that of his brother, Paul Dresser, song-writer and composer a number of years ago. Dresser was the author of a number of songs which were popular a few years ago and some of which are

till heard. Among these are "On The Banks Of The Wabash" and "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me," both of which are still in use in programs where old favorites are suitable.

In picturing Dresser, Dreiser presents a good picture of the typical successful song-writer and actor of a few years ago, the happy-go-lucky type of fellow who spends and lends while he has the money and who is the center of admiration while at the peak of success, but who dies in want and without friends after his downfall. "In his day he had been by turn a novice in a Western Seminary which trained aspirants for the Catholic priesthood; a singer and entertainer with a perambulating cure-all troupe or wagon ("Hamlin's Wizard Oil") traveling through Ohio, Indiana and Illinois; both end and middle-man with two or three dif-

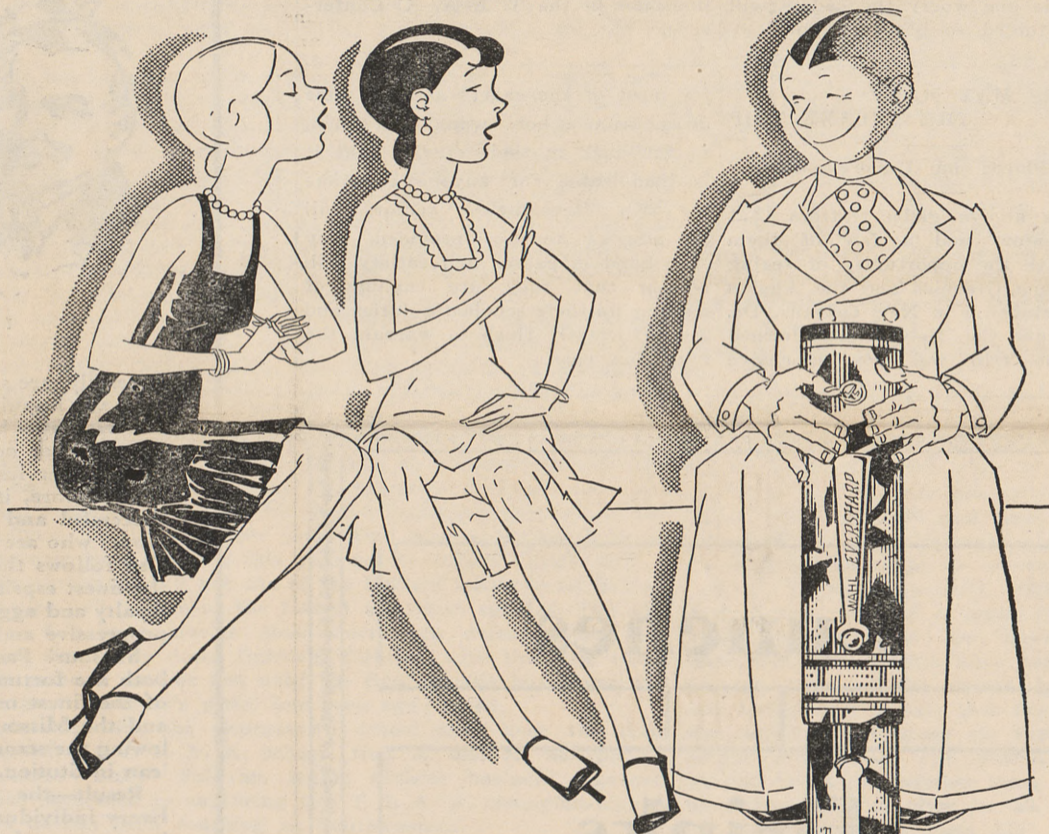
ferent minstrel companies of repute; the editor or originator of a "funny column" in a Western small city paper; the author of the songs mentioned and a hundred others; a black-face monologue artist; a white-face ditto; a comic lead; co-star and star in melodramas. "There is little wonder that Dreiser picked him as one of the characters of his book."

"Culhane, the solid man" is the title of a sketch equally as good as that of Dresser. Picture an Irish prize-fighter who has come up from the ranks by virtue of the money he earned in the ring to the ownership of a sanatorium where physical wrecks of the more intellectual walks of life come to repair ill-used and worn-out bodies. Realizing that he can never be the social equal of these men, he takes particular delight in showing them their weaknesses and in ridiculing them, dominating them

in mind and body and subjecting them to torture, mental and physical, for a period of six weeks. Picture a man who can do this and get paid six hundred dollars for doing it, and you have pictured Culhane.

To me Culhane is one of the most admirable characters in the book, not because of any characteristic or because of any virtue the moralists would admire, but because he takes the very men, the preachers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, etc., who are supposed to be trying to reform him and others in his class, and dominates them in every way possible. Theoretically he is to them a "brand to be snatched from the burning," yet they are awed by his very presence and their intellect gains them nothing in face of his superior will.

It is of sketches of this type that *Twelve Men* is composed, sketches of (Continued on Page 12)



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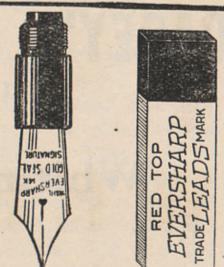
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