

Cain . . .

MILDRED PIERCE. By James M. Cain. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941. 388 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

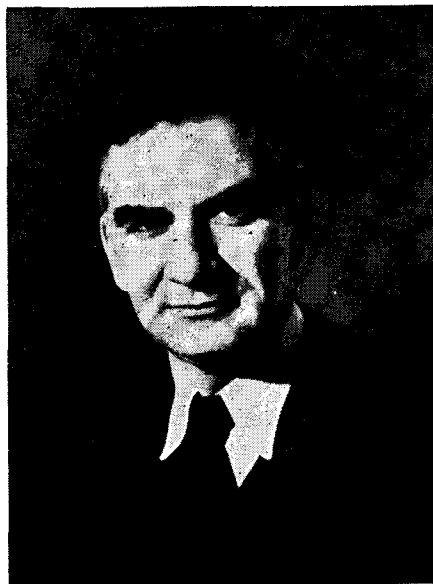
MR. CAIN must have known some prototype of Mildred Pierce's daughter, Veda, for it does not seem possible that such a completely and consistently loathsome little wench of seventeen could be a product of pure imagination. Whether reported or invented, Veda is a great creation; it would be such fun to look her up and strangle her slowly, perhaps beating her head on a cobblestone a little at the same time.

Mildred Pierce is a grass widow whose knack for cooking turns into a restaurant chain in the suburbs of Los Angeles. She is promiscuous but not quite nymphomaniac; some sympathy for her is lost when, in her beginnings as a waitress, she makes a neat pick-up in approximately two minutes flat and spends a week-end at Arrowhead with a total—well, he could hardly be called stranger after the week-end. Mildred is not very pretty, but she is good-natured, needless to say, and she lives on the phrenetic fringe of moviedom where exquisite "gams," as they are repeatedly called in the book, exercise an ultimate and fatal fascination.

Mildred has two daughters; the young one is all right and Mildred doesn't care much for her—neither does the author, so she dies in childhood. The elder one, Veda (her name was chosen by an astrologer), is a female puppy redoubled in spades and Mildred adores her. Veda, a miserable poseur and ruthless opportunist, has nothing but contempt for her mother; contempt which she conceals only when she is working her for whatever she happens to need.

It takes Mildred a long time to learn. She is insulted, scorned, assaulted, used as a helpless stooge in a 'breach of promise' blackmail scheme, plundered and finally robbed of a not too satisfactory husband by her daughter, but it is not till she has given up what reputation she has in what proves to be a publicity stunt for Veda that she finally realizes that her darling daughter is not really all she should be.

Mr. Cain writes, as usual, with great vigor and economy, but this book is neither so tight nor so dramatic as the frugal "Postman." The story wobbles seriously at the end where Veda, hopeless as a pianist, turns out incredibly to be a great coloratura. Mr.



James M. Cain

Cain's observations on the low natures of coloratura sopranos—they should all be married to left-handed pitchers and the happy couple shot immediately—as expressed by Mr. Treviso, the music teacher, are very funny. It seems they all borrow ten thousand bucks to study in Italy and never pay back the money. Then they marry a banker, get all his money, kick him out, and marry a baron. And many other things. Watch out for coloraturas.

Still, no one has ever stopped in the middle of one of Jim Cain's books.

Jordan . . .

ONE RED ROSE FOREVER. By Mildred Jordan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1941. 550 pp. \$2.75.

Reviewed by ROSEMARY C. BENÉT

HOW much the historical novelist should invent is always a moot question. Miss Jordan's book is a case in point. Here we have a life of Heinrich Wilhelm Stiegel, who made the beautiful glass which bears his name. Part of the book is based on fact, and presents an interesting picture of the life of a glass-maker in Pennsylvania around 1750. Here we also have a romantic interpretation of the same gentleman's life, making him the central figure in a long, passionate love-story . . . an apocryphal and highly colored affair with an elfin creature named Diane. History probably requires that the author give him two legitimate spouses, one wealthy, one rather dull, but the love of his life is the glamorous Diane who flits about the glass works when she is not off with the Indians. The fact that Stiegel courted two ladies for their money, and married still a third, does rather get in the way of the romance.

Stiegel was a twenty-one year old German immigrant when he arrived in Philadelphia in August, 1750. He was ambitious and eager to get on by whatever means he could, and his rise was

Your Literary I. Q.

By Howard Collins

MORE CLERGYMEN—AND WOMEN

Briefly described below are some more literary figures who represent the clergy. (Others Jan. 6, '40 and July 13, '40.) Have you made their acquaintance? Allowing five points for each one whose name you can recall, and another five if you remember the story in which he or she appears, a score of 60 is par, 70 is good, and 80 or better is excellent. Answers are on page 14.

1. When this monk witnessed the collapse of a bridge which sent five people to their deaths, he resolved to place theology among the exact sciences by proving that for each victim death at that moment was best.

2. This zealous but nearly blind old monk mistook an island of penguins for humans and baptized them.

3. Accidentally drawn into a pub where a holdup had just occurred, this dignified bishop seized the opportunity to put to work the knowledge gained from constant reading of detective stories, and solved the mystery.

4. This prioress sang through her nose, spoke French, and was so tenderhearted that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap.

5. Once a member of the French aristocracy, he became a priest and spent part of his life spreading the gospel in an African slave-trade camp.

6. During a famine this bishop assembled the poor people in a barn and burned them to death in order to have more food for the rich; he was punished when an army of mice swarmed into his tower and devoured him.

7. This village priest allowed such crimes as murder, burglary, and kidnapping to be expiated at half-a-crown apiece, but he frowned on flirtations.

8. By buying a new automobile, this 40-year-old itinerant woman preacher persuaded a 16-year-old Georgia farm boy to marry her.

9. Entering the troubled household of his brother in the guise of a butler, this Indian bishop restored tranquillity before revealing himself.

10. For twenty years a Trappist monk, he broke his vows, married a charming English girl, and then, remorseful, returned to his Sahara monastery.



Mildred Jordan

rapid. He wanted money, and power, and possessions; he was an opportunist. He, also, according to Miss Jordan was a frustrated artist. Devoted to music, he never got a chance to express himself in that art. His thwarted artistic impulse, his creative urge, went instead, into his magnificent glass. He died practically penniless, holding Diane's hand.

This is readable and interesting. The romance is lusty; the style lively. The part about manufacturing glass is accurate, and there are many details about what the people ate and wore. Miss Jordan's novel, however, falls between two stools. It is neither history, nor fiction, and suffers thereby. It would be better if it were either the glass-manufacturer's romance (fiction) or the life of H. W. Stiegel (history). As it is, it seems rather like a movie where one person said "Let's do a big picture on Stiegel glass" and another said "Let's insert plenty of love interest." In combination, each gets in the way of the other, and the fires of love sometimes outshine the fires in the glass furnace.

ANSWERS TO LITERARY QUIZ

1. Brother Juniper, in "Bridge of San Luis Rey," by Thornton Wilder
2. Saint Mael, in "Penguin Island," by Anatole France.
3. James Lyons, the Bishop of Broadminster, in "The Bishop Misbehaves," by Frederick Jackson.
4. Madame Eglantine, the Nun Priorress, in "Canterbury Tales," by Chaucer.
5. Brother Francois, in "Anthony Adverse," by Hervey Allen.
6. "Bishop Hatto," by Robert Southey.
7. Father Paul, in "Gentle Alice Brown," by W. S. Gilbert.
8. Sister Bessie Rice, in "Tobacco Road," by Erskine Caldwell.
9. Joshua Smith, the Bishop of Benares, in "The Servant in the House," by Charles Rann Kennedy.
10. Boris Androvsky, in "The Garden of Allah," by Robert Hichens.

The Mantle of Life

THE SOILS THAT SUPPORT US. By Charles E. Kellogg. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1941. 370 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by RUSSELL LORD

DR. KELLOGG knows so much about soils, a subject in which few men are learned, and he writes with such clarity and vigor that it is always a pleasure to read what he has to say. This is "an introduction to the study of soils and their use by men." It is addressed to the student and general reader anxious or willing to be told the facts about that thin and still mysterious mantle of pulverized rock and organic matter into which all life as we know it enters, and out of which comes all life renewed.

Americans are old enough now to be told about the soil. The classic tendency to consider the subject mundane or vulgar accounts in some part, Dr. Kellogg reminds us, for the decline of Rome. He is no old scientist. Young, as mature men go; equipped with imagination and fired with boldness, he strains at the leash which so often holds men of science to cautious, impersonal statements within the tight little fences of their special fields. And it is precisely when he strains and stretches the leash longest that, to my taste, his book is best. "People use these soils," he says in his first chapter. "They have blessed them and cursed them, sweated over them and loved them, lived with them and died for them." That seems to me a grand statement of exactly the right approach.

The middle chapters deal with Kellogg's specialty, soil geneology. Here the account at times may seem to the layman to become involved as a Virginian's account of a second cousinship; and for all of Kellogg's valiant seeking to avoid mere erudition, a good deal of many-jointed nomenclature gets in. They are fascinating words, however; and Kellogg's description of how differences growing out of the Gray-Brown Podzolic soils of our north and the Yellow and Red Podzolic soils of our south "finally led to a terrible war between the states" is as daring a piece of historical soothsaying as I have ever seen. He strains at the leash here, all right, and I like it.

At points close to the line of a somewhat constricted specialty, on the other hand, he perpetrates understatement which seems to me excessive. I have to smile when in his Preface he speaks of this good and solid work of 370 pages as a "little book." Then he



Charles E. Kellogg

begins to edge out after us "panic-shouters" as to soil troubles, and I become more alert. Some erosion is good for a soil, he remarks in his second chapter. Granted. "But if it goes on too rapidly—more rapidly than soil formation—the soil may be injured." This I cannot regard fondly as a harmless personal foible, either scientific or semi-scientific in the best sense. It is of course a strictly true statement. But it is rather like saying upon beholding an armed host approaching, that a number of men are coming over the ridge with guns and they may not be hunting rabbits. A studied understatement can be as wrong and as damaging as an impetuous overstatement. The slightly grudging attention Kellogg pays our almost unparalleled picture of soil waste, principally by accelerated erosion, straightens out his record considerably, in the end. On page 303, it seems to me, he finally comes around to a justly measured statement on this phase of his vast subject. But he never tugs at the leash on this question. The leash tugs him.

I hope in this review not to have appeared merely quarrelsome. This book is good writing, all of it—stimulating, strong. In most ways it is the best general book on soils that I have ever read and it grows as it goes along.

Russell Lord is the editor of *The Land*, a Quarterly, and author of "Men of Earth," "To Hold This Soil," and "Behold Our Land."

Colt Newssheet

The Colt Press, San Francisco, publishers, among other things, of the Epicure series of recipe guides to China, Mexico, and Hawaii, are now issuing a newssheet every six weeks. This is made up with the care and taste characteristic of their publications, and contains some pleasant editorializing upon events in the book world.