

SCROLL DOWN TO READ THE NY TIMES REVIEW
Apologia Pro Vita Sua.

Rex Stout, whose mystery novel "The League of Frightened Men" has served as the basis for a United Front of highbrows and mere readers of The Saturday Evening Post, explains himself as follows. Taking a clause from our review as his text—"the fact that Rex Stout was a legitimate novelist before he took up the trade of mystery monger"—he writes:

*Once I lived in humble hovels
And wrote a few legitimate novels.
Now, tiring of the pangs of hunger,
I ply the trade of mystery monger.*

*Murder, mayhem, 'gun and knife,
Violent death, my staff of life!*

*I wrote, though eating not bewhiles,
Of fate profound and secret trials.
Now—calmed the empty belly's fury.
I write of guilt and trial by jury.*

*Suspense, excitement, thrills, suspicion,
Sources of excellent nutrition!*

*I took men's souls on bitter cruises,
Explored the heart and necked the Muses.
But now to me I say: poor critter,
Be fed, and let who will be bitter.*

*Clues, deductions right and wrong,
O Mystery! Of thee I mong!*

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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

By JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

TO the select company of old maestros among the detectives of fiction add the refulgent name of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe. He is fat and placid, he distrusts firearms, he spends four hours a day raising orchids and has bribed me to review a book about him by sending me one, he eschews industrial espionage, and his consumption of properly chilled beer is prodigious. But in spite of all these un-Neronian, non-wolfish, thoroughly indolent characteristics and habits, he can pull the wires of sleuthing prestidigitation with the best of them. The way he works in Mr. Stout's "The League of Frightened Men" (Farrar & Rinehart, \$2) is a joy to see.

Of course, there is something suspect about all mystery fiction that features lovable detectives. The nature of sleuthing, which demands a combination of snooper and calloused wretch (with perhaps a touch of the sadist added), is not calculated to attract lovable men, nor does it foster lovable qualities. But Nero Wolfe, in "The League of Frightened Men," is first of all interested in keeping circumstantial evidence from trapping an innocent. He does display a little unlovely glee in convicting a broker of theft and murder, but the broker was a bad egg from way back. And if this broker hadn't tried to do Nero out of an honorarium of some \$50,000, it is doubtful that Nero would have pounced on him with such alacrity. Nero is tolerant of mortals who commit mayhem, but he just doesn't like cupidity.

Out of the Ordinary.

"The League of Frightened Men" is a mystery story that has imaginative qualities beyond the ordinary. It all goes back to the year 1909, when thirty or more Harvard undergraduates, indulging in a college prank, were accidentally responsible for the crippling of Paul Chapin, a freshman. Under the leadership of Andrew Hibbard, the dismayed and repentant thirty formed what came to be known as the League of Atonement, paid the bills for the surgical treatment necessary to save Chapin, and thereafter saw to it that the victim never went hungry.

In the language of Archie Goodwin, who is Nero Wolfe's Man Friday, Chapin is a "lop," an expressive designation that derives from the more dignified "lop-sided." It is not to be wondered at that Paul Chapin resents the League of Atonement, resents the pity it has expended on him, resents the crippling and even the doctor's care that saved him from death. But for twenty or more years the resentment is hidden. Then Paul discovers his talent for writing mystery stories, and begins killing off the League of Atonement in print. When Judge Harrison, of the League, meets a violent end (he falls from a cliff), it is not a matter for particular worry. But when the League members receive copies of a poem through the mail promising similar deaths to all, it looks as if Paul Chapin had started to live out the plots of his vengeful fiction.

So the League of Atonement becomes the League of Frightened Men. Many of them are important men, having had time to go far in the world since the Commencement of 1912. A smaller

number is just managing to get by. But judge and indigent newspaper man, doctor and unemployed architect, broker and dipsomaniac taxi driver, one and all they are promised the same retribution. And when Eugene Dreyer dies under suspicious circumstances, and a second vengeful poem is mailed to the surviving members of the League, the agitation is terrific. Individual League members begin to look around for police protection; they no longer feel so sorry for poor Paul Chapin.

Nero's Mass Offer.

Enter Nero Wolfe, ready to do business with the League on a mass basis. Nero believes in charging all the traffic will bear, no less, no more; he offers his services for a large lump sum, but splits it up so that the indigent newspaper man, the taxi driver and the unemployed architect will not be shelling out more than they can afford. (The broker is soaked on a good Rooseveltian basis, but it turns out that he should have been soaked even more.) And the frightened League finally accepts Nero's terms.

From this point on "The League of Frightened Men" becomes an object lesson in the slippery qualities of circumstantial evidence. I guessed the solution on page 177 (as it turned out), and was busy congratulating myself on this perspicuity on page 286 as Nero begins to gather up the loose ends of the plot. But then, just to put a small fly in the ointment of the reader's possible complacency, Mr. Stout gives a sudden twist to his story, adds a further complication, and provides a real villain. It doesn't alter the lesson about circumstantial evidence, but it adds a sting, a fillip of gratified blood-lust, to a story that is rapidly turning cheerful. There is a subordinate moral to "The League of Frightened Men." It is, "Don't worry about men who are habitually ferocious in print."

The writing in "The League of Frightened Men" is good-humored, breezy, colloquial. The characterization is sharp, and reminds me constantly of the fact that Rex Stout was a legitimate novelist before he took up the trade of mystery monger.

History in a Nutshell.

J. F. Horrabin's "An Atlas of European History" (Knopf, \$1.50), which is a companion volume to his "An Atlas of Current Affairs," is very likely to prove an invaluable little book. Although Mr. Horrabin is compelled to do some arbitrary choosing within the limits of his space, he manages to illustrate—in pictures and in swift prose—virtually every important boundary change in Europe since the break-up of the Roman Empire. The changes, whether ancient or relatively modern, often have a very significant bearing on the current news, as one will discover by investigating Mr. Horrabin's maps illustrating the shifts in frontier lines involving Germany, to pick the most contentious example. Classes in Current Events should purchase "An Atlas of European History" in carload lots.