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Oh, the things men do to torture themselves. BURLESQUE PARAPHERNALIA AND SIDE DEGREE SPECIALTIES AND COSTUMES is an amazing flashback to a time before the Internet, television, radio, movies and pretty much every other form of entertainment.

For years, men used to join secret clubs and learn bizarre handshakes, and once a year they would dress up in outlandish costumes and parade down the main street of town, celebrating their fraternity. They might claim that their main contribution to society was to benefit some well-deserving charity, but in reality, their goal was to torture new pledges.

Whenever a newcomer would present himself to the lodge, you can only imagine the fun that would ensue when the poor sap sat on an electric chair or rode a mechanical ram or got smacked on the ass with an exploding slapstick. You’ll find all that and more in Fantagraphics’ faithful reprint of the original 1930 edition of the DeMoulin Brothers and Company catalog (with an introduction by Charles Schneider and an appreciation by no less than David Copperfield). This book is chock full of some of the funniest and most sadistic devices ever dreamed up by the human mind. It’s almost as if the guy from the SAW movies had wanted to get laughs instead of frights—and fans of current outrage cinema may be happily startled to find something actually called “The Human Centipede” (pictured above) in its pages.

You can forget about political correctness; that goes out the window right away. By the time you arrive at the Masks of Nations on page 120, you’re ready for the awful caricatures that face you. No one, including Uncle Sam, escapes becoming a grotesque parody. There are also skeletons and camels that smoke cigarettes, as well as chairs that collapse and fake buzzsaws. And in case your lodge couldn’t figure out a way to make use of all of these wonderful devices, there are plenty of suggestions for hilarious scenarios.

If you’re into social history of the secret life of men, or just take a perverse pleasure in practical jokes, you’re going to love this book. I don’t know if there are still groups of men who act like this…oh, hell—of course men still act like this; they love to embarrass each other, so this book might start a few guys salivating over what they can do to their friends. On the other hand, with personal injury lawyers every 20 feet, how could any group get away with having this kind of fun? In the end, this is just one more piece of Norman Rockwell small-town Americana that has fallen by the wayside. But at least we’ve now got one of the catalogs to remind us of that era. And that is very cool.

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