EUGENE FIELD'S BOOKSELLER

By Earl E. Fisk

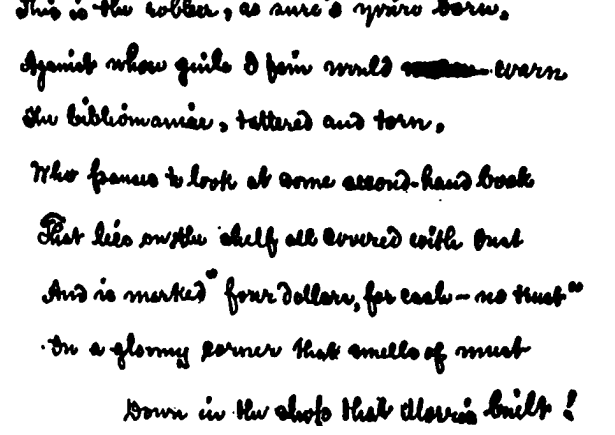
WHEN I was fourteen years of age my mother gave me as a Christmas present a copy of Eugene Field's "Love Affairs of a Bibliomanic". I have read the book at least once a year ever since and there has been none other that I have cherished more. Upon my reading of the "Love Affairs" last year I was filled with the desire to make a pilgrimage. Accordingly I went to Chicago to visit the haunts of Eugene Field and perhaps to gossip with some of his old friends. The trip was a great success, and I made a discovery: I found the bookseller of whom Field speaks so fondly in his books and poems.

I first called upon Walter M. Hill, the rare book dealer. We had a long chat about Field and bookish Chicago of twenty-five years ago. Hill was a clerk at McClurg's at the time of the famous "Saints and Sinners Corner". But he said that he couldn't tell me near so much about those days as could some of Field's old friends who were still living in Chicago, so he arranged to have me meet them. He also offered to get "Trotty Field" (now Mrs. Will J. Engler) down for lunch, but this did not transpire. I did, however, talk with Dr. Frank W. Gunsaulus, Friar Francis of "The Two Friars", Fred Skiff of the Field Museum, who had been a close friend of Field's since his Denver days, Slason Thompson, who had been on the "Daily News" staff with Field, and Bert Taylor, "B. L. T." of the Chicago "Tribune", upon whom fell the mantle of Eugene Field. Dr. Gunsaulus, Fred Skiff, and Bert Taylor all died within a month of each other shortly after this.

From Slason Thompson I learned a lot of incidents of Field's life not to be found in books. Mr. Thompson is not what we book lovers would call bookish, but he was a great personal friend of Field's and of his family. He wrote the only biography of Eugene Field. I had never been able to get a copy of this and he told me why it is so scarce. Mrs. Field objected to some of the passages and at her request the book was withdrawn and suppressed by the publishers. I was, however, fortunate enough to find a copy in splendid condition at a second hand bookshop before I left the city. It contains a detailed account of Field's life, many personal anecdotes, and most interesting of all, a great number of facsimiles of letters and manuscripts. The frontispiece of the second volume is a facsimile of the illuminated manuscript of "Little Boy Blue". Walter Hill told me of the sale of this manuscript at auction in New York. He bid over two thousand dollars for it but it was sold to John McCormack, the singer, for $2,450.

It was Fanny Butcher (the clever girl who does the Tabloid Book Review for the Chicago "Tribune") who put me on the trail of Eugene Field's bookseller. When I told her of my pilgrimage and my interest in Field material she said, "The very man for you is Frank M. Morris, who lives right here in Chicago and has some book rooms up in the Marshall Field

Annex building. He was Eugene Field's favorite bookseller. Field went to his bookshop in the old days every afternoon at four o'clock. It was the hangout of the bookish crowd in those days and the 'Saints and Sinners' was



Facsimile of verse written by Eugene Field under the picture of Frank M. Morris

started there. By all means look him up." Full of her enthusiasm, I phoned and made an appointment with Mr. Morris.

Francis Wilson, the actor, was a great friend of Field's. He says that Field was very fond of the proprietor of a certain underground bookshop in Chicago, and that the feeling was cordially reciprocated. Field would go down to this place of an evening and when the doors were closed the proprietor and he would repair to the back of the shop. Then Field would put his feet upon the table and sing old songs and tell stories at the top of his tremendous voice. He said of his bookseller friend, with genial satire, that he had in him "the making of a delightfully unscrupulous and successful robber". It was in this shop that Field gave impromptu talks in his breezy, boyish way on books and collectors. The fame of the place grew and it became the meeting ground of all the congenial crowd that centred about Field. This was the bookshop of Frank M. Morris, at that time located on Madison Street, and known by Field and his coterie as "Frank's Place".

Throughout Field's poems and prose on bibliomania there is frequent mention of his bookseller. In Chapter IX of "Love Affairs of a Bibliomanic" he says:

> My own observation and experience have taught me that as a class booksellers are exceptionally intelligent, ranking with printers in respect to the variety and extent of their learning. By the very nature of their occupation booksellers are broad-minded; their association with every class of humanity and their constant companionship with books give them a liberality that enables them to view with singular clearness and dispassionateness every phase of life and every dispensation of Providence. They are not always practical, for development of the spiritual and intellectual natures of man does not at the same time promote dexterity in the use of the baser organs of the body; I have known philosophers who could not harness a horse or even shoo chickens.

In the chapter on "The Delights of Fender-Fishing" he tells of a fishing trip he took with his bookseller up in the Wisconsin woods:

> My bookseller is a famous fisherman, as, indeed, booksellers generally are, since the methods employed by fishermen to deceive and to catch their finny prey are very similar to those employed by booksellers to attract and entrap buyers.

Later he describes his bookseller:

> To return now to the matter of booksellers, I would fain impress you with the excellences of the craft, for I know their virtues. My association with them has covered so long a period and has been so intimate that even in a vast multitude of people I have no difficulty in determining who are the booksellers and who are not. For, having to do with books, these men in due time come to resemble their wares not only in appearance but also in conversation. My bookseller has dwelt so long in his corner with folios and quartos and other antique tomes that he talks in black-letter and has the modest engaging look of an old stout binding, and to the delectation of discriminating olfactories he exhaleth an odor of mildew and tobacco commingled, which is more grateful to the true bibliophile than all the perfumes of Araby.
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> I have studied the craft so diligently that by merely clapping my eyes upon a bookseller I can tell you with certainty what manner of books he sells; but you must know that the ideal bookseller has no fads, being equally proficient in and a lover of all spheres, departments, branches, and lines of his art. He is, moreover, of a benignant nature, and he denies credit to none; yet, withal, he is so righteously discriminating that he lets the poor scholar have for a paltry sum that which the rich parvenu must pay dearly for. He is courteous and considerate where courtesy and consideration are most seemly.

From Eugene Field's descriptions and from Fanny Butcher's enthusiastic comments one would expect to find Frank Morris a slim, ascetic, bespectacled, mild eyed, benign old character who wanders around among musty books on dusty shelves. He should wear shiny, slimpsy clothes and his fingers should tremble as he reverently touches a cherished volume that one wishes to buy. But Frank Morris isn't a bit like that. He is a plump, distinguished looking old gentleman who if met on the street or in a club would easily be mistaken for a prominent college president or a well known business executive. He does, however, smoke long thin stogies constantly and his shop has that delicious odor of tobacco and old books commingled which Field loved so well. But he is far from being a stogy old recluse. He plays golf every Sunday morning in winter as well as summer and talks the golf jargon as well as Chick Evans or George Ade, both of whom are warm personal friends of his. Frank Morris knows and has known more literary celebrities than the editor of any literary magazine or newspaper book supplement. He has seen the passing procession and can relate intimate anecdotes from the days of Eugene Field and James Russell Lowell to those of Sherwood Anderson and John Drinkwater. His clothes are not shiny and slimpsy, but when I saw him he wore a smartly tailored and neatly pressed suit of grey tweed.

Morris is a Hoosier, as was his friend James Whitcomb Riley. He is a graduate of an Indiana college and a member of Delta Tau Delta fraternity. In 1887 he came to Chicago and started a bookshop, and he has run one ever since. His first shop was located on West Madison Street. It very shortly became popular with bookish Chicagoans. Wilbur D. Nesbit tells how one night in midwinter there was a fire on West Madison Street, and the next morning Morris's bookshop was neatly wrapped in congealed streams of water. Morris came down and looked things over and concluded that it would be really out of the question to stay in that building, as he did not like draughts, so he moved over on

To Frank M. Morris:

Believe me, by all those endearing old charms
With which your granite shop is provided,
I shall honor the trade by whose help I have made
A collection of freaks that's derided;
And, if you believe me — why, then I'm to ask
That, this Fortune betimes readjust me
With dollars and dimes for my yarns and my rhymes,
You still shall continue to trust me.

Eugene Field.

October, 1893.

Facsimile of inscription in a presentation copy of "A Little Book of Western Verse"

Wabash Avenue. Frank landed on the wrong side, whereupon he came back on the right side, in a half-basement room on the Monroe corner just back of the Palmer House. His customers had no sooner become accustomed to this spot — "it truly was a restful place to drop in and steal reads" — than the march of improvement made a flank movement on that corner and the building was torn down. So he took his books and things and moved over to the Pullman Building on the corner of Adams Street and Michigan Avenue. This was in the same building that now houses the shop of Fanny Butcher : Books. Morris has not grown rich, but he has prospered and has now retired to several rooms on the thirteenth floor of the Marshall Field Annex building, where he is still selling books. These rooms have almost the same old bookshop atmosphere that the others had. Almost the same old books, although several of them have probably been sold. One may go in there after lunch, with half an hour to spare, and read as far as one can in any book from the shelves. If one hasn't time to finish it Frank will lend a book mark to put in the place, so that the reading may be continued on the morrow.

I spent most of one morning with him gossiping about the old days and friends. He told me of Field seated talking, joking, and reading aloud his poems to an eager crowd of listeners,

of whom the most frequent were Dr. F. W. Gunsaulus, Dr. Frank Bristol, Dr. Woolsey Stryker, George W. Cable, Harry B. Smith, Francis Wilson, Opie Read, Eugene Banks, Joe Jefferson, Ben King, Ernest McGaffney, Irving Way, Frank Larned, and Peter Dunne. Some of the later well known habitants of the shop were George Ade, Wilbur D. Nesbit, Will Payne, Otis Skinner, Charles E. Russell, James Whitcomb Riley, Bert Leston Taylor, Wallace Rice, Emerson Hough, John T. McCutcheon, and Clare A. Briggs.

Frank Morris has many interesting association and presentation books, but the most interesting of all are those Eugene Field gave to him. These are not for sale, of course. On one occasion Field came into the shop during the absence of the proprietor and finding a print of him, wrote under the picture in his microscopic handwriting:

This is the robber as sure's you're born,
Against whose guile I fain would warn
The bibliomanic, tattered and torn,
Who pauses to look at some second-hand book
That lies on the shelf all covered with dust
And is marked "four dollars, for cash — no trust"
In a gloomy corner that smells of must
Down in the shop that Morris built!

EUGENE FIELD. 1888.

This he carefully laid away between the leaves of a book where it was discovered some days later.

In "A Little Book of Western Verse", belonging to "the robber", he wrote:

Believe me, by all those endearing old charms
With which your quaint shop is provided,
I shall honor the trade by whose help I have made
A collection of freaks that's derided;
And, if you *believe* me — why, then I've to ask
That, till Fortune betimes readjust me
With dollars and dimes for my yarns and my rhymes,
You still shall continue to *trust* me.

EUGENE FIELD.

October, 1889.

One day when Field was in the shop he discovered that Morris did not have a copy of Allibone's "Dictionary of Authors", which he said was a criminal offense upon the part of a bookseller. So on Christmas Eve, just before closing time, he came into the shop with three heavy volumes under his arm. In the front of the first volume is inscribed, "To my dear friend Frank M. Morris, with hope that he will continue to trust me and let my credit account grow fatter. Eugene Field, Christmas Eve, 1889." Morris told me that he never sent Field a bill for any book which he took from his shop after that.

Frank Morris is a Chicago institution, just as much as is the University of Chicago or the Art Institute. Tourists in the city usually go to see the packing houses, Michigan Boulevard, and the rest of the sights, but people of a bookish mind should not miss seeing Chicago's best loved bookseller.