

# THE BOOK SALESMAN

By Matthew Baird, Jr.

“WHAT a romantic spot a bookshop is; how I would love to work in one and just browse around among the delectable editions when not too busy.” That’s what we hear. Ah yes, there is romance, but often it is not 100% pure, as is love or a sure tip on the ponies. There is alloy mixed with the pure base: the alloy of dust; the alloy of one hundred copies of a fast waning favorite and the bill in the drawer; the alloy of trying to please the customer; and the alloy of discussing juveniles with a doting mamma when your thoughts are with Mencken and his Prejudices.

You stand in the aisle, during a leisure spell, and look out on the crowded thoroughfare, thoughts thousands of

miles away, and thousands of books crying to be sold. The door opens and in wafts some cold air—and a lady. She's hunting for a book. They all are and we're the beaters. No, she doesn't know what she would rather have, and you attempt to check your thoughts at the right book as you mentally go galloping between Thomas à Kempis's "Imitation of Christ", and Théophile Gautier's "Mlle. de Maupin". She must notice from a look on your face the breathless steeplechase you are having, for she quietly removes a fence from the course by saying, "It's for someone who is sick." You quickly note the age and the bare third finger of the left hand and eliminate husband and child, at the same instant that Gautier goes into a convent and à Kempis to a ball game. "An elderly person?" you nonchalantly ask, as you look straight ahead and toy with your watch chain. "No." It is breathed out as you say "Ah" for the doctor whose vandyke is roaming on your back. "It's for a young man, a cousin of my mother's." A karma of embarrassment envelops the statement and brands the cousin lie. To be a good salesman you must then give a dry sob and quickly clench the hand that is resting on a book within her gaze. "Yes, he has had his left leg amputated." Your heart pours out to her in her misery, and you see visions of a crutchy wedding, crutchy home and children. In your innermost self you wish it had been his head. All you do is murmur, "Left leg?" As though had it been the right leg you could have given her the choice of hundreds of books, you grope about looking for a literary substitute for a left leg amputation. You cannot suggest "The Stretcher Bearer"—that's too much of a probe in the wound; neither would you offer

"Westward Ho". She wouldn't see the application any more than you would. Desperation clutches you as you wander ever onward to the children's book department, when as manna from heaven a thought strikes you. You grab the first book, which happens to be one of a hundred sheep dog stories, quickly wrap it up and hand it to her, as you beg her not to question your decision but simply accept it. You tell her in a jerky way that you remember a similar case last August—or was it July?—when you were commissioned to supply a book for a left leg amputation and this book so admirably filled the bill that the patient is going to have his other leg taken off if the author writes another story. You take the two dollars and in your nervousness put it into your pocket, instead of the cash drawer, and the transaction is closed.

You pick up a half morocco Swinburne, take a good drink of "Dolores", and again face a problem. A young man is standing with a she's-caught-me look and you ask him tenderly as to his book yearning. Yes—you already knew it—a gift book for a lady. You are immediately irritated by his brazen confession of intimacy with the fair one; what right has he to suppose in his callow self-importance that he can make her happy? You recite a few lines of "The Lady of Lyons". You remember, "Mother I did send her flowers and she did wear them." You get that far and he takes the book; his seventy-five is nestling with the amputation two dollars.

You quickly recognize the wan expression of the next seeker and pick up Crozer Griffith's "Care of the Baby" and the "Century Cook Book". She takes her choice and no word is spoken. If she has a lustreless look in her eyes she takes both.

Then you are confronted with a vision in silks, satins, furs, frankincense and myrrh. Through her lip stick results she lisps that she desires "A Thousand Ways to Please a Husband"; you give it to her, all the while wondering why she wants a thousand when you feel positive she has never tried one. Where is she now? Probably on her way to buy a new gown and antidote at least five hundred of the thousand ways. Dear delightful little human parasite, but we love her and she doesn't need the vote to be happy. *We* will make her so. Another Eve, a sister of the last species, is poring over a three dollar book when you rubber heel to her proximity. By the way, it takes a very nice distinction to know just when to put on the emergency in approaching irresistible femininity. You lay your hand softly on an adjacent tome as though you were about to say "Nice bookie". As you feel her osprey feathers or birds of paradise or whatever you call two hundred dollars' worth of South American caudal appendage sweep your wan emaciated hand, she begins "How well I remember . . . ." You hope she is going to say how well she remembers Sweet Alice Ben Bolt; but no, it's that old story about remembering when books were a dollar eight. Yes, and you remember when eggs were thirty cents a dozen and shoes seven per. I have some regard for the man who invented a dollar and a quarter, and a kindly feeling for the lesser light who discovered a dollar, but that miscreant who foisted a dollar eight on this already overburdened world should share the fate of the one who invented poison ivy and nettle rash.

You go callously through the next hour with class A B and C customers until you meet your triweekly prob-

lem. She doesn't know the name of the book and gives you a withering look if you attempt to go into research by asking the author's name. She knows you must have it; all book stores have it. There is a girl in it who is in love with a man, and another woman is in love with him. At this point you call the sales specialist in the eternal triangle department, and even she is stumped. Out the fair one goes, her manner indicating that she would fain arrange for you a night course in literature. If only she had remembered that one of the women had blond hair, we could by elimination have brought the choice down to one of 267. We inwardly say "Pshaw" or some synonym and thank Soulé and Crabb for their aid in relieving pent up feeling.

A breezy individual appears in the offing, her topsails shot with fire, and wants to know if a book will reach her very dear friend Mrs. Spoof who is sailing first cabin on the S. S. "Heaveto" on Saturday. You warble a complete yes and then she goes to picking. The backs of four books are broken in her haste not to delay the shipment, when she bethinks herself of "White Shadows in the South Seas". Feeling absolutely certain that Mrs. Spoof is a bad sailor and shouldn't have sea stories, you timidly suggest "Roaming Through Changing Germany", but it doesn't work and poor Mrs. Spoof will a-seaing go.

All these different problems are interspersed with isolated questions. Do Ethel Dell's books come in the Nelson Library edition? Will Harold Bell Wright bring out another book this week? Yes, I know he had one last week. Is it in "Pickwick" or "Vanity Fair" that some woman says, "Speak for yourself, John", and myriad other queries that tax the soul.

The shadows lengthen; closing time is approaching and the salesman at eve has sold his fill. Five-thirty will soon be here. No customers for the past hour; but now at 5:27 not the flotsam and jetsam but rather the ivory, peacocks, and golden moidores of the purchasing public flock in as at a rummage sale. You are tired and irritable and want to go home, or to someone else's home, and still they come. You stand on one foot and then on the other, while a purchaser is perusing Balden's "Heartease", you the while wishing you had a copy of the more soothing Allen's Footease.

Books are being put back in their places, you hear the whirl of the safe's combination as the bookkeeper ends her day, and just as your thoughts are beginning to take a soup, fish, and best girl channel, in blow the last three rows of the cast of a musical comedy. By paying attention to the

squeakiest one you gather that Tottie Coughdrops is leaving the show on Saturday and "we girls want to give her a swell book". You head the procession to the glass-cased de luxes. In a paternal way you pat a crushed levant "Vicar of Wakefield", at the same time reaching for a tree calf "Marcus Aurelius". One of the dears says they can't take both as they have only ten dollars. She thought it two volumes of the same story, the second volume being the one in which Marcus marries the vicar's daughter. But, after all, what do we know of stagecraft?

All have gone, the lights are dim, the front door locked. You take your hat, bow obsequiously to the Empress Eugénie, reverently salute Chief Justice Marshall, throw a kiss to Manon Lescaut, and go into the night, making a mental resolve to abstain from all reading, yea even a time table.