

# CONFESSIONS OF A BOOK-FIEND<sup>1</sup>

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The following text is reproduced from Robert Coupland Harding's journal, *Typo*, issue 48, Vol. IV, 27 December 1890. Texts like this were occasionally supplied by 'correspondents' who were often anonymous and wrote in this colloquial 1st-person style.

Eleven years have passed since the occurrence of the events that I am about to relate; but their memory is still only too vivid. And paragraphs in the daily press lately narrating the rough usage accorded to certain book-canvassers, with the half-jesting criticisms of the "Book-Fiend" and his ways, have revived recollections of the most painful experience of my life. Let me tell the story.

Things had not been prospering with me for some time. I had been nine months out of regular work, and there had been sickness in the family. My funds were low, I was gradually getting into debt, and my good wife and myself were sorely discouraged. It was at this period that my eye fell upon the following advertisement in the *Evening Fog-Horn*:

**£6 TO £8 A WEEK!—May be readily earned by persons of any age or either sex. No previous knowledge or special training required. For particulars, address M.F., Box 2879, Dunedin. Complete outfit for £1, mailed free. N.B.—This industry is PARTICULARLY SUITED to the district in which this advertisement appears. Apply early.**

Under other circumstances I might have passed over the advertisement without notice; but now the big figures stared me in the face and seemed to fascinate me. My wife noticed my abstraction.

"What is it?" she asked.

I passed over to her the *Fog-Horn*, with my finger on the big "£6".

"I have no faith in it," she said. "Unskilled people cannot earn anything of the kind in any business. I remember young Brown sending away thirty shillings for an 'outfit' in answer to an advertisement of this kind. What do you suppose he got in return?"

"I have no idea."

"Half a dozen fret-saws—just roughened steel wire—with a little wooden frame, a sheet of patterns, and a printed circular making out that there was a fortune in amateur fret-cutting. He said he could have bought the lot at a toy-shop for sixpence."

But the £6 to £8 a week haunted me—especially as I was scarcely earning as many shillings. So after some cogitation, I posted a letter to M.F., and in due course received a reply stating that it was an agency concern to which the advertisement referred, and that only persons of good abilities and education and high character could be engaged. It then made a number of inquiries, which I considered a little inquisitorial, and wound up by asking me to give two references as to character. I let this letter lie some days; but at length did all I was asked to do. After a week or two came a letter announcing that I had been chosen from numerous applicants in my district; that a certain defined "territory" had been allotted to me, and that by the S.S. Pandora a box had been shipped to my address. After paying sundry charges I received and opened the box. It contained sample copies of half-a-dozen big books in heavy and showy bindings; a diary, a large number of ruled forms, two or three copies of a pamphlet entitled *The Book-Agent's Vade Mecum*, and some other literature of the same class. My wife now became aware of my appointment, and regarded it with what I thought a most unreasonable prejudice.

My letter of appointment referred me to the printed literature for all necessary instructions, and I turned to the *Book-Agent's Vade Mecum* first. It was an extraordinary work. It was issued by the

Great Universe Publishing Company of California for the instruction of their canvassers, and was a treatise of several chapters. The first dilated on the lofty and ennobling mission of the man who diffused high-class literature through the community, and indicated what rare abilities he should possess. That he might be familiar with the results of many years' experience in the art of canvassing, the book was written. Then followed most minute and elaborate instructions. The traveller, on visiting a new locality, was first to obtain names of "prominent citizens." He was next to privately ascertain their personal foibles and weaknesses. He was to ingratiate himself with the clergymen, making use of religious books for the purpose. They were to have these books at a large discount if they would give a written recommendation. Their signatures were, if possible, to be obtained. Then the local dignitaries were to be gained over, and afterwards the undistinguished multitude. No house must be passed over in the canvass. Instructions were given as to the precise mode of flattery adapted to each class of possible customer. Where the husband was absent, the wife was to be gained over. Direct flattery in such cases was not recommended; but in no case must the canvasser omit to praise the children, and to explain the immense value the book would be to them.

While I was reading these directions with very mingled feelings, my wife had picked up a smaller pamphlet, and began to read. "My dear," she said, "what do you think of learning this lesson by rote?" and she read off volubly a quantity of that kind of "patter" with which some of you—who have been assailed by an active book-agent—are familiar. I found that each of the six books had its companion pamphlet, which the canvasser was strictly enjoined to commit to memory, and recite to all possible customers, holding his book in his hand and turning to the plates and pages indicated as he read.

I examined the books. They were got up expressly for canvassing, containing a selection of plates, a few specimen pages, and a number of sheets of writing paper ruled in columns for subscribers' names—the rest blank paper. The covers showed three kinds of binding—cloth, 25s.; leather, 35s.; morocco, gilt, £2 2s. The books were:—*The Christian's Complete Exponent of Holy Scripture*; *Lives of Celebrated Murderers*; *The Marvels of Astronomy, Earth, Air, and Sea, or Terrestrial Wonders*; *The Human Family*; *Our Great Country*. It was explained that all tastes would be suited in this collection; that any person taking the lot would have such a varied library that he would probably never buy a book again, and that each work was so beautifully illustrated, and so edifying, as to be irresistible to any person of taste. I was, however, recommended not to bring the *Celebrated Murderers* too prominently under the notice of the parsons whose good offices I desired.

Looking over the sample pictures and text, I could not feel much enthusiasm in my new duties. I read a page or two of the stuff I was directed to commit to memory, and decided that I would do nothing of the kind. But having taken up the work, I would go through with it.

The ministers were not inclined to subscribe, but most of them good-naturedly gave me a written recommendation of the *Christian's Complete Exponent*. To one of them I made the publisher's proposal that he should put down his name, with a private understanding that he was not to be asked to take the book; but he looked so astonished and shocked at the suggestion that I never repeated it. And from that hour I recognised that no man could fulfil the instructions of the *Vade Mecum* and retain his self-respect. One clergyman, after carefully looking over the *Exponent*, told me his opinion. The book was self-contradictory, and absolutely valueless. It was not even the work of the professor whose name it bore on the title-page, having been outrageously garbled by an ignorant compiler.

For two months I wearily canvassed in town and country. I faithfully kept my diary written up, and posted the weekly schedule giving the results of my work. These were poor, and my principals told me so. They felt convinced that I had not committed to memory those invaluable little

pamphlets, and that I was neglecting to act on the advice of the *Vade Mecum*. It was quite true. They told me of an exceptionally good agent who had done so. He was at Oamaru—a smaller “territory” than mine—and took three times as many orders.

At a country inn one day I found two men in the same line as myself, who at once recognised me as new to the work. We fraternised; but the tales of their villany in book-canvassing gave me a chill. One fellow had sold the same work to father, mother, and eldest daughter on a single order, and had been paid by all three. The other had been pushing a volume with French engravings of a rather startling kind, and narrated how he had worked one off on the servant-maid at the inn. He told her it was “all about the blessed St. Anthony”; and he said, “The girl paid me thirty-five shillings, thinking she was going to have a pictorial *Lives of the Saints* as big as a Family Bible. You should have seen her rage when she got the book! She tore it up and burnt it. She said the pictures were ‘horrid’, and the Temptation of St. Anthony was the worst of all.”

Payment was to be on delivery, and my nine or ten weeks’ work, with travelling expenses, had cost a good deal. The total result of my labours was an order-list representing ninety-three pounds, of which one-third was to be my share. I made up my order and sent it to Box 2879; for I could not go on further without some ready money. I received a somewhat cold reply—the more energetic agents had obtained so many subscribers that most of the works were out of stock, and I must await the next American mail-steamer.

Six weeks passed, and I received a letter informing me that the parcel had been shipped, and that the “invoice and other documents” had been sent to the local agency of the Associated Bank of Queensland. They had the pleasure of drawing upon me at sixty days for amount of invoice, £68 9s 8d, and commended their draft to my kind protection.

Sixty days! By extraordinary effort I might collect the money in the time. The same day a bank-messenger came with the bill, which I accepted, paying half-a-crown for the stamp. Then I went to the bank for the bill of lading. “But you have not given us your cheque,” said the official. “No,” I said; “I have just given a bill at sixty days.” “That,” he said, “is only a formality. Here are our printed instructions. We have to hold the goods till the money is paid. You can take up the bill now, less—let me see—two shillings and sevenpence discount.”

I was thunderstruck. For the first time I fully realised for whose benefit book-agencies were organised. It was with a heavy heart that I told my wife the disastrous state of things. Sixty-eight pounds! We had not as many shillings in the house.

A fortnight passed. I began to think the sixty days would expire before I could obtain the cash; but I found an acquaintance who advanced the money for three months, at the very reasonable rate, under the circumstances, of eight per cent. In the meantime I had another shock.

Passing Benjamin Solomon’s auction-mart, my eye fell on some gaudily-bound books. I went in and looked at them as they lay on the table. There were some fifty or sixty, in cloth, leather, and morocco; and to my consternation I recognized the familiar titles of the *Complete Exponent*, the *Celebrated Murderers*, and all the rest of the hateful names. Were the books mine? Had the bank dishonoured my bill in anticipation, and put my property in a sale-room? Impossible.

“What are these?” I asked of the clerk, who seemed surprised at my sudden pallor and my evident dismay.

“Those? Unsold stock of a book-fiend at Oamaru. Got lots of orders, but people went back on ’em, and let him in for near a hundred pounds, I’m told. Found the whole South Island flooded with the stuff, and sent ’em here—about the only place where they hadn’t been circulated.” I felt a cold chill as

I realised what my prospects were.

“Are they sold?” I asked.

“They were to have been sold last Saturday; but the sale is put off to Saturday next. Fine chance for cheap literature. They’ll average two or three shillings each.”

A desperate thought struck me. Should I buy the lot, and supply my subscribers from them, letting my own go? It was certainly against the agreement that my “territory” should be thus invaded. But no—the books would not correspond with my orders.—Alas, there would have been enough and to spare.

An irresistible impulse led me to Mr Benjamin Solomon’s mart on the day of the sale. I waited with but languid interest while he knocked down a quantity of second-hand furniture, a consignment of hams and cheeses, a number of fowls, a great quantity of oranges and bananas, and several tons of potatoes. So many odds and ends followed, that it seemed as if he would never come to the books. When he did, the comments of the assembly on book-agents generally, and their disparaging remarks on these publications in particular, cut me to the heart. The clerk’s forecast was verified. I saw a complete set of the six, in leather, knocked down at twelve-and-sixpence—a little more than one-third the price of a single volume. Other lots were sold lower still. The whole parcel—larger than mine—did not bring more than seven or eight pounds. Need I say that I was sick at heart when three days later I took to the bank £68 9s 8d—£65 of it borrowed money—to redeem the documents and clear my goods? I had not received a duplicate invoice, and had been unable to understand the total. I could not understand it now. For the books I had to pay £62—the “outfit”—the precious *Vade Mecum*, &c.,—accounted for another pound; postages and other items wholly or partly fictitious made up another five—so much simple plunder.

My books unpacked, I went straight to find my first subscriber, who, without any pressing, had given his order for three books at two guineas each. “Jolly things for the children,” he said. He was a commission agent, advertising large sums of money to lead. His shutters were up; present address unknown—and the Official Assignee was engaged in investigating the state of his affairs.

At the close of the day I had delivered three books and collected £4 5s, the first returns from my speculation. One of these books was the *Astronomy*—the purchaser having ordered it because his son took a great interest in the science. Some of my subscribers were not to be found—others repudiated their orders—and I reached home greatly dispirited. My wife, I noticed, looked depressed, and on my asking the cause, handed me the *Fog-Horn*. In the correspondence column was a slashing attack on the *Astronomy*, by someone who had bought a copy at the sale. “The book,” he said, “is worse than worthless, and only exhibits the inconceivable ignorance of the compiler. The information is stolen, without the slightest acknowledgement, from a dozen authorities, and the bookmaker could not add ten words of his own to connect the paragraphs without blundering. Some of the information is sixty years out of date.” He gave numerous examples of the misleading nature of the work. On page 12, it was stated that Mars had no satellites, and on page 320 it appeared that the minor satellite of Mars revolved in about 7½ hours. Some of the diagrams were put in upside-down, several had wrong titles, and an illustration of a Fourth-of-July pyrotechnic display in the city of Washington did duty for “the meteoric shower of 14th November, 1867.” The editor took up the subject in a short article, headed “Fools and their Money.” And I had five copies still to deliver of that wretched book!

The two other works I had delivered were the *Lives of Murderers*. Acting upon a hint in my instructions, I had “placed” them at hotels. I refer to this work again merely to add that it was printed from worn-out plates, and that three male and two female portraits, repeated in rotation, represented

some thirty criminals. The cuts were scarcely recognisable; but I found that one was really an old portrait of Charles Dickens, and another of the Czar Alexander, while a block of Mrs Beecher Stowe (engraved about 1853, and representing a youthful face, with hair in ringlets), three times repeated, did duty for Lucrezia Borgia, Madeline Smith, and Constance Kent.

I scarcely managed to deliver another book in town. Women slammed their doors in my face, and one of my subscribers asked me if I thought him such a dashed fool as to pay two guineas for a book that he had seen sold at auction for three shillings. He could go now to Levison's second-hand store and buy as many as he wanted at four-and-sixpence each!

I held these people's written orders, and could no doubt have enforced my claims; but I felt as if I had obtained their signatures under false pretences. The *Vade Mecum* provided for the contingency of repudiation, as it did for all others. "The agent's golden rule," it said, "is this:—In canvassing, adopt the *sauviter in modo*; in collecting, the *fortiter in re*." I scarcely need to say that I was grievously deficient in the latter quality.

Disgusted with the town, I went on my country rounds. I had better success. But a good many of my subscribers could not be found; others had no money. I would not, under the circumstances, deliver the books—I might as well have done so, after all—but I found that the subscribers were all very indifferent as to whether they had them or not. I collected a fair proportion of the subscriptions; but the amount was largely swallowed up in expenses. And one dark night, between two country villages, I had the misfortune to mistake a ford. I struggled out of the river safely with my horse, but my clothes and a number of my books were spoiled, my order-book was lost, and I caught a cold from which I suffered for several months, and which caused me serious apprehension.

On my return I found awaiting me a sharp letter from my principals. They were astonished at my negligence in allowing the books to lie at the port more than three weeks, instead of obtaining and delivering them at once. They were greatly disappointed in me—I had the poorest record of any of their agents, and this was the crowning blunder. By my culpable neglect and gross inefficiency I had spoiled, so far as their publications were concerned, one of the most promising territories in the colony. And more to the same effect.

I never but once wrote and posted a letter in a thorough red-heat of anger; and that was on this occasion. I had nothing to fear from the Company, for their claim was satisfied, and I had no memory of any favors demanding my gratitude. Quite the contrary. So I "gave them a piece of my mind" in most unmistakable terms. I hinted that their model agent at Oamaru had not, after all, made a grand success of the work. This was more of a home-thrust than I knew. I found afterwards that he had sent three orders in succession, and given as many bills. His first supply was more than sufficient, and having no funds, he allowed the second and third notes to be dishonoured. The Company, who had discounted the bills, had to pay them, and they, not the agent, had placed the books in the hands of the auctioneer.

I have little more to add. The greater part of my time for five months was devoted to the work, more than half my stock was left on my hands, and was ultimately sold by auction at even lower rates than the former lot. I did not retain so much as a single volume to remind me of my experiences. My bill for the borrowed money of course could not be met. I managed to pay £5 on account and renewed the balance. It was four years before that liability was cleared off, and I paid in interest upon it altogether £11 8s. I never made a detailed balance-sheet—I was too sick of the whole thing; but my wife reckoned up the matter, and found that in addition to my time, my loss had been over sixty pounds.

Such was my experience of a book-agency. I have come to the conclusion that no honest man can carry on the business on the lines laid down in the *Vade Mecum*. Craft, dissimulation, and actual falsehood are absolutely essential to effect the sale of the pretentious rubbish which forms the stock-in-trade of such institutions as the Great Universe Publishing Company. The whole business is a gigantic and shameless fraud. I have told my story that you may not lay the sole blame upon the unhappy "Book-fiend." With all his cunning, he makes a very poor living. The hacks who compile the books with scissors and paste—one of them is said to have produced the copy of a great illustrated volume entitled *History of the Religions of the World* in ten days—are men who have failed in literature, and who drudge for the merest pittance. The enormous gains are annexed by the financial companies, who turn out this worthless literature in editions of from twenty to fifty thousand, and who systematically obtain the money of the public under false pretences.