

By LAWRENCE S. THOMPSON

Of Bibliological Mendicancy*

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IF I WERE a communicant of the Roman Catholic church, I have no doubt that I would take the orders and become a Franciscan. Begging books is my second nature, and, if I may be a little autobiographical, I can offer an abundance of logical explanation.

I came to bibliographical maturity as the Depression held our country in its grips, and on more than one occasion in the 1930's I would exhaust my meagre capital on Fourth Avenue and be compelled to live off of fish heads and rice until the next pay day. During the war I was schooled in the fine art of bargaining from Mexico City to Santiago de Chile; and it is my normal reaction to open negotiations on this basis, although I do manage to restrain myself if I am dealing with a Munksgaard, a Goldschmidt, a Zeitlin, or a Wreden. Since the war I have devoted myself to building a research library for which the book budget is in inverse proportion to the acquisitive zeal of the faculty.

The lesson of mendicancy came early, for a poverty-stricken graduate student with a few hundred books of his own soon develops a cunning sense for persuading others to part with their books for free. That is the way of the bibliologist. Gradually I progressed from playing on the sympathies of a few compassionate professors to the stage where I was able to persuade the late Randolph Adams to per-

mit me to raid the duplicate basement of the Clements Library or even to extract occasional treasures from the fabulous hoard of my kind and generous friend Nathan van Patten.

At this point I should reassure my friends among the bibliopoles that bibliological mendicancy on the part of a librarian has no ill effect on the book trade. The Commonwealth of Kentucky appropriates barely a hundred thousand dollars a year for acquisition purposes in its one research library, a paltry sum by comparison with the figures approaching the half million mark which the two great state universities of California have spent in some years, but we could and would spend as much as we could get in state funds. Bibliological mendicancy in Lexington is pointed at the unusual, the out-of-the-way item, books which seldom ever are offered for sale at all.

There are two keys to successful begging: boldness, tempered by respectful courtesy, and a thorough knowledge of the higher realms of the world of books and the denizens who haunt it. The latter should be a primary consideration in setting up the curricula of our library schools. Only those library training agencies which fully recognize the book as their *raison d'être* can produce graduates who will realize the full potential of their high mission in modern life. The names of Rosenbach, Bradshaw, Haebler, and Brunet must be as familiar to them as those of Dewey, Panizzi, Dziatzko, and the other founding fathers of library technology.

Of boldness in begging a book there are

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hardly limits. In Lexington we examine regularly the gifts to the New York Public Library as reported in its *Bulletin* on the theory that anyone who gives a book to that great library will also give one to the University of Kentucky. We are about 95 per cent right. Several years ago I noticed that Mrs. Georg Vetlesen had presented to NYPL the magnificent three-volume catalog of her Chinese jade collection. A carefully phrased letter brought a set to Lexington, and each of my colleagues in other university libraries who requested a copy had a similar response until the limited edition of a hundred copies was exhausted.

We have had no such good fortune with the priceless Frick and Doheny catalogs, and I'll offer a box at the Derby to anyone who can supply the proper leverage to extract them. We had much better luck with the Wrenn Catalog, but perseverance was essential. No copies ever appear, to my knowledge, on the antiquarian market, for apparently the University of Texas made a careful and comprehensive distribution to libraries when it first appeared. When we convinced Miss Ratchford that serious research in nineteenth century English literature was being done at the University of Kentucky, she went to bat for us and located an unneeded copy which had been sent to the Crerar. The administration of that great scientific library generously deposited its extra copy in our library.

Good turns to other libraries always pay off. For years we had coveted the remarkable facsimile of the *Codex Argenteus*, the great Gothic Bible of Ulfilas, which the University of Uppsala issued a quarter of a century ago and distributed to only a few of the largest research libraries. A gift of a few hundred miscellaneous issues of American local history periodicals, given more to be rid of a burdensome collection of duplicates than for any regular exchange,

brought Ulfilas to the Bluegrass. We had a similar happy experience with the new university library of Olomouc, which might normally be forgotten as buried deep behind the iron curtain.

A slightly sophistic even though subtle use of history can often bring remarkable gifts. When the Spanish Foreign Office was solicited for copies of Francisco Vindel's great series on fifteenth century Spanish printing, we referred to "the historic relationships of the Spain and the Commonwealth of Kentucky." Now those of you who have read Winston Churchill's *The Crossing* realize full well that patriotic Kentuckians have only the bitterest memories of General James Wilkinson's conspiracy with the Spanish governor in New Orleans to take the Commonwealth out of the new union; but General Franco's foreign minister was either ignorant of American history or misinterpreted our vague allusion. In any event, he sent us the books. A similar technique was used on the Imprimerie Nationale in Paris to get the beautiful facsimile of the seventeenth century Virgil issued by the Sun King's Imprimerie Royale, but our references to our "historic ties" included no mention of Daniel Boone's exploits against the French and Indians who sought to destroy his infant settlements.

The mendicant who seeks books does not always operate on the high level of *Haupt- und Staatsaktion* with correspondence with dignitaries of foreign governments. Anyone who is building a research library must be prepared to go anywhere anytime and do anything. Never will I forget a telephone call from the old community of Russellville, Kentucky, advising me that a chicken house full of "old papers" was going to be dumped in the Green River the next day. With no other excuse than pure intuition, I drove 200 miles to Russellville in a university-

owned panel truck and retrieved four early Kentucky imprints, an armful of Shaker documents, and some choice nineteenth century Kentucky newspapers. I also brought back half of the dust and dirt of Logan County. I felt justified in charging the Commonwealth my dry cleaning bills, but the state auditor will never find them described as such on my expense accounts.

Kentucky courthouses are just as productive and just as filthy as Kentucky chicken houses. In the attic of the Harrison County Courthouse at Cynthiana I found a complete file of the eighteenth century Kentucky session laws buried beneath the very substantial evidence of many generations of pigeons. The haul from the courthouse in the delightful old river town of Greenup was not so productive, although I did locate two hitherto unknown Grayson, Kentucky, imprints in the ton and a half of books that came out of the back rooms. Far more rewarding was a meeting with a husky and talkative local character who turned up to watch the curious proceedings. When the observer identified himself as Jesse Stuart, I immediately forgot the books and began to work on Jesse for his manuscripts!

Our Kentucky authors have been usually generous in giving us their manuscripts, but, like most members of the writing clan, they are likely to be careless with their manuscripts once they have been printed. Our most widely read Kentucky author—more popular even than A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Robert Penn Warren, or Jesse Stuart—is a humble Trappist in Gethsemane, Kentucky, known within his order as Father Louis, O.C.S.O., but to the world of readers as Thomas Merton. Boston College beat us to the draw on the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but *The Ascent to Truth* and *The Sign of Jonas* have a permanent home in the university library of the one Southern state where Roman Catholic com-

petes on equal terms with Calvinist and Campbellite. Father Louis is, of course, enjoined to the observation of silence, but apparently his vows do not keep him from writing long and chatty letters, many of which are today in our archives.

Sometimes the beggar collects unusual gifts to accompany books and manuscripts. With a batch of James Lane Allen letters we had to take the opera cloak of the great man. Much more useful is the half-consumed bottle of rum presented by R.L.S. to Judge Mulligan, one-time U.S. Consul in Samoa and the world-renowned author of *In Kentucky*. It came to us with Stevenson's dancing slippers, death mask, and some first editions. I say it is useful inasmuch as I keep it in the same unopened state in which I found it in September 1948 to prove I am not an alcoholic.

The best historical manuscripts are usually secured not through purchase but through solicitation or inheritance. The latter is a slow and uncertain process; and, when successful, the joy of acquisition is generally dampened by the loss of a valued friend. Some of the most significant manuscript records relative to the Ohio Valley are in our Samuel M. Wilson Library; and the fact that this noble collection is located in the University of Kentucky Library at present is due in large measure to the long years of friendship between Judge Wilson and Thomas D. Clark, head of the University of Kentucky history department. It is a basic qualification for a university librarian that he be a bookman and at home among other bookmen; and even if it is not his natural inclination, it is his solemn obligation to cultivate the friendship of all collectors in his vicinity.

Even the gratifying communion of fellowship with other collectors cannot rival the thrill of the chase, of hunting manuscripts in the hinterlands. In this field

integrity is as important as boldness; for some of our American universities have been seriously embarrassed by none-too-scrupulous professors who have failed to return manuscripts given as loans, who have accepted collections from a single indifferent member of a family without consulting his co-heirs, or who have walked out of county clerks' offices too frequently with suspicious bulges in their overcoats. Only recently the University of Kentucky was permitted to copy a manuscript diary from the 1840's and 1850's which other manuscript hunters had considered inaccessible. The owner explained that two of her friends who had permitted the University Library to copy family papers photographically had received the originals back promptly and in the same condition in which they were sent, and that she had confidence in us.

The tales that can be told by a manuscript hunter are legion. On one occasion I received a call from Pikeville advising me that we could have a collection of papers if we removed them immediately after the funeral of the deceased owner. I arrived just as the funeral cortege was going out the front door and the movers were coming in the back door. I got the papers, but it was a unique experience to have been in a dead heat with a corpse.

On another occasion I was accused by an irate father—and owner of some nice Civil War letters—of being the Lochinvar who was meeting his daughter clandestinely. I established my identity as the father of two little girls in Lexington and a stranger in the community, but I didn't get the papers.

Some of the manuscripts of historical significance that have been acquired for the asking are fascinating. There is the account book of a famous madame of a famous house of ill repute, and the names of her creditors read like a political who's who. It must remain under lock and key for another generation. Again there are the

oaths of allegiance of exconfederates to the United States of America, from the Pike County Courthouse and containing, *inter alia*, the promise of Captain Anderson Hatfield, C.S.A. (Devil Anse to all lovers of mountain lore), to be a good citizen and participate in no more civil strife. Perhaps most fascinating of all is the correspondence containing the treacherous schemes of General James Wilkinson, Benjamin Sebastian, and the *capitán general* of Louisiana and the Floridas.

The still unfound treasures of the Ohio Valley as well as the rest of the United States in the fields of history and literature are legion. Contemporary documents of the greatest significance are frequently overlooked. To be sure, autograph collectors will bid a tidy sum for Harry Truman's now famous dogcatcher letter to John L. Lewis; but I am far more proud of the manuscript of a suppressed and unpublished chapter from a book by an influential modern American Catholic novelist. The state university librarian who does not attempt immediately to secure manuscript, galleys, page proof, and correspondence with publishers by local authors of contemporary belles lettres and other significant works by authors in his jurisdiction is doing a grave disservice to future historians of regional literature. In states where there is no official records administration program the librarians of the state university and the state historical society must watch state officials vigilantly to prevent destruction of historically significant official records. Old timers in Frankfort have told me that they have seen the channel of the Kentucky River choked with records dumped into it by state officials who have no proper concept of their responsibility to historians of the future.

On a somewhat different level of operation—and not always as a mendicant—we have found it extremely advantageous to

maintain contact with bibliophilic societies throughout the world. For a graphic arts collection it is essential to acquire the more important publications of the Grolier Club or the Sociedad de Bibliófilos Argentinos. For a literary collection the editions of the Swedish Sällskapet Bokvänner are basic texts as well as beautiful books. The publications of the Gutenberg-Gesellschaft are as important for general history and literature as they are for the history of the book. The Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia is an outstanding example of a society that gives its members a far greater dollar value in publications than the modest dues of \$4.50 per annum.

Every research library should make an effort to have at least one member of its staff on the rolls of each of the world's important bibliophilic societies, or, when this is not possible, at least to maintain direct contact through a friend (as for example, the University of Kentucky Library with the Roxburghe through our loyal friend, Nathan van Patten, or with the Zamoranos through our stalwart ally, H. Richard Archer). The clubs themselves offer valuable publications at bargain prices, but even more important are the contacts and associations developed through them. The Zamorano's *Hoja Volante* plus a Los Angeles telephone directory plus the epistolary skill of the curator of our graphic arts collection result in a constant influx of fine and privately printed pamphlets and often books from Southern California. The only American member of the Grafisk Cirkel (Copenhagen) is in Lexington, and he is on many a mailing list for keepsakes and privately printed Scandinavian books which reach these shores only very infrequently.

A persistent and insatiable love for reading bibliography is an indispensable qualification for the successful bibliological mendicant. Unless he reads the January and February issues of *Grafiskt Forum*,

Nordisk Boktryckarekonst, and *De grafiske Fag* for the inevitable review articles on the annual deluge of Scandinavian Christmas books, he will fail to get many a choice item available for the asking. Only the bibliographical *aficionado* who examines carefully the *Revista interamericana de bibliografía* will note such items as Mr. James B. Child's recent account of bibliophilic societies in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil and their publications. Regular careful perusal of the bibliography of current bibliography that appears in the *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* will yield many a gem from some out of the way corner of the globe. The splendid check-lists of current literature appearing at the end of each volume of *Studies in Bibliography* should be examined meticulously at any university offering advanced work in any field of the humanities. In order to secure everything listed here, the librarian must not only have a good book fund, but he must also beg.

One is constantly surprised by discovery of books and pamphlets important for research that are not in the book trade and are available only to him who is sufficiently imaginative and aggressive to request them. I found no less than fifteen such items in the most recent of the annual Renaissance bibliographies published by *Studies in Philology*. From the lists of new books in librarianship and bibliography which are published regularly in *Bibliotheekleven*, the Dutch library periodical, two or three items of value must be requested as gifts every month by the library that proposes to be complete in these fields. The state historical journals are veritable treasure houses of guides to obscure but significant publications. Some of them, such as the ones for North Carolina, Michigan, and East Tennessee, publish regular checklists of current writings on the history of their jurisdictions. Others, such as Kansas, issue acquisition lists of the state historical society library which

serve the same purpose. All are equally indispensable and must be checked in a research library, for in each such list there are always several items not in the trade.

It is generally well to have an abundant supply of telephone books and specialized directories on hand in order to write directly to obscure and non-trade publications. At the University of Kentucky Library, however, we have found still another good use for the who's who type of directory covering Latin America. It has been my experience that 95 per cent of all Latin American authors are flattered by a request to present a North American library with inscribed copies of their books and generally comply eagerly. Careful checking of *quien es quien* or the equivalent publication for each Latin American country and direct solicitation from authors has yielded almost 3,000 titles of Latin American *belles lettres* in the last five years. The worst that can happen to a courteously phrased request for a Latin American author's book is an equally courteous reference to a local bookseller. I can recall only a half dozen such replies to about 800 letters of this type sent out last year.

An ordinary library school graduate cannot be a good bibliological mendicant if he has no further special qualifications. Any failure to recruit librarians with these special qualifications can be laid squarely at the feet of practicing librarians, for each of us must assume a share of responsibility for perpetuating the profession through able young men and women. In general the qualifications of the successful bibliological mendicant are the identical qualities that are needed in the successful librarian of a research library.

I have mentioned aggressiveness and knowledge of books. These two qualifications imply much more. The intelligently aggressive man or woman also has the courtesy, the good manners, the effective

command of written and spoken English, the ingratiating appearance, and the systematic mind which impress the object of his aggressiveness. A knowledge of books implies about everything that modern education seems to be drifting away from. It implies a thorough background in some basic field (whether the humanities, the social studies, or the pure sciences), a good knowledge of two or three key languages and at least a title-page knowledge of the rest, an inveterate suspicion that in every human activity there is a book or a document for the library, catholic sympathies with learning in all fields, and the highest standards of scholarly endeavor and personal integrity. Give a university library director these qualifications plus the indispensable administrative ability that must be present in all head librarians, and the sky is the limit. What he can't buy, he can beg.

Future generations will not remember present-day librarians for their organizational charts, their surveys, their classification and pay plans, their ingenious fanfold forms—however necessary they may be for day-by-day operations. Scholars of the twenty-first century will measure the accomplishments of the librarian not so much by his techniques in dealing with a twentieth century public but by the collections he built. The collections must be meaningful within the framework of the national library economy, and a minimum book fund is necessary to attain stated objectives. But the skillful and experienced bibliological mendicant can do a great deal to rectify the delinquencies of a niggardly board of trustees that will set up \$200,000 a year for athletic "scholarships" and half that sum for books. The beginning and the end of librarianship is the collecting and servicing of books, and successful policy and practice of begging are essentials in fulfilling this objective.