

THE METHODS  
*of*  
MR. SELLYER

*A Book Store Study*

BY

STEPHEN LEACOCK

AUTHOR OF

*"Behind the Beyond"*

*"Nonsense Novels"*

*"Literary Lapses," etc.*

NEW YORK  
JOHN LANE COMPANY  
MCMXIV

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MR. SELLYER

WRITTEN BY  
STEPHEN LEACOCK  
ESPECIALLY FOR  
THE ANNUAL CONVENTION  
OF THE  
AMERICAN BOOKSELLERS'  
ASSOCIATION

MAY FOURTEENTH  
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TO  
THE BOOKSELLERS  
OF  
THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

# THE METHODS OF MR. SELLYER

## *A Book Store Study*



“Wish to look about the store? Oh, by all means, sir,” he said.

Then, as he rubbed his hands together in an urbane fashion, he directed a piercing glance at me through his spectacles.

“You’ll find some things that might interest you,” he said, “in the back of the store on the left. We have there a series of reprints—‘Universal Knowledge’ from ‘Aristotle’ to ‘Arthur Balfour,’—at seventeen cents. Or perhaps you might like to look over the ‘Pantheon of Dead Authors,’ at ten cents. Mr. Sparrow,” he called, “just show this gentleman our classical reprints,—the ten-cent series.”

With that he waved his hand to an assistant and dismissed me from his thought.

In other words, he had divined me in a moment. There was no use in my having bought a sage-green fedora in Broadway, and a sporting tie done up crosswise with spots as big as nickels. These little adornments can never hide the soul within. I was a professor, and he knew it, or, at least, as part of his business, he could divine it on the instant.

The sales manager of the biggest book store for ten blocks cannot be deceived in a customer. And he knew, of course, that, as a professor, I was no good. I had come to the store, as all professors go to book stores, just as a wasp comes to an open jar of marmalade. He knew that I would hang around for two hours, get in everybody’s way, and finally buy a cheap reprint of the “Dialogues of Plato,” or the “Prose Works of John Milton,” or “Locke on the Human Understanding,” or some trash of that sort.

As for real taste in literature,—the ability to appreciate at its worth a dollar-fifty novel of last month, in a spring jacket with a tango frontispiece,—I hadn’t got it and he knew it.

He despised me, of course. But it is a maxim of the book business that a professor standing up in a corner buried in a book looks well in a store. The real customers like it.

So it was that even so up-to-date a manager as Mr. Sellyer tolerated my presence in a back corner of his store: and so it was that I had an opportunity

of noting something of his methods with his real customers,—methods so successful, I may say, that he is rightly looked upon by all the publishing business as one of the mainstays of literature in America.

I had no intention of standing in the place and listening as a spy. In fact, to tell the truth, I had become immediately interested in a new translation of the “Moral Discourses of Epictetus.” The book was very neatly printed, quite well bound and was offered at eighteen cents; so that for the moment I was strongly tempted to buy it, though it seemed best to take a dip into it first.

I had hardly read more than the first three chapters, when my attention was diverted by a conversation going on in the front of the store.

“You’re quite sure it’s his *latest*?” a fashionably dressed lady was saying to Mr. Sellyer.

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Rasselyer,” answered the manager. “I assure you this is his very latest. In fact they only came in yesterday.”

As he spoke, he indicated with his hand a huge pile of books, gayly jacketed in a white and blue. I could make out the title in big gilt lettering—“*Golden Dreams*.”

“Oh yes,” repeated Mr. Sellyer. “This is Mr. Slush’s latest book. It’s having a wonderful sale.”

“That’s all right, then,” said the lady. “You see one sometimes gets taken in so: I came in here last week and took two that seemed very nice, and I never noticed till I got home that they were both old books, published, I think, six months ago.”

“Oh, dear me, Mrs. Rasselyer,” said the manager, in an apologetic tone. “I’m extremely sorry. Pray, let us send for them and exchange them for you.”

“Oh, it does not matter,” said the lady, “of course, I didn’t read them. I gave them to my maid. She probably wouldn’t know the difference anyway.”

“I suppose not,” said Mr. Sellyer, with a condescending smile. “But, of course, madam,” he went on, falling into the easy chat of the fashionable bookman, “such mistakes are bound to happen sometimes. We had a very painful case only yesterday. One of our oldest customers came in a great hurry to buy books to take on the steamer, and before we realized what he had done,—selecting the books I suppose merely by the titles, as some gentlemen are apt to do,—he had taken two of last year’s books. We wired at once to the steamer, but I am afraid it’s too late.”

“But now, this book,” said the lady, idly turning over the leaves. “Is it good? What is it about?”

“It’s an extremely *powerful* thing,” said Mr. Sellyer, “in fact, *masterly*. The critics are saying that it’s perhaps *the* most powerful book of the season. It has a——” and here Mr. Sellyer paused, and somehow his manner reminded me of my own when I am explaining to a university class something that I don’t



know myself,—“it has a—a—*power*, so to speak—a very exceptional power; in fact, one may say without exaggeration it is the most *powerful* book of the month. Indeed,” he added, getting on to easier ground, “it’s having a perfectly wonderful sale.”

“You seem to have a great many of them,” said the lady.

“Oh, we have to,” answered the manager. “There’s a regular rush on the book. Indeed, you know, it’s a book that is bound to make a sensation. In fact, in certain quarters, they are saying that it’s a book that ought not to——” and here Mr. Sellyer’s voice became so low and ingratiating that I couldn’t hear the rest of the sentence.

“Oh, really!” said Mrs. Rasselyer. “Well, I think I’ll take it anyway. One ought to see what these talked-of things are about anyway.”

She had already begun to button her gloves, and to readjust her feather boa with which she had been knocking the Easter cards off the counter. Then she suddenly remembered something.

“Oh, I was forgetting,” she said. “Will you send something to the house for Mr. Rasselyer at the same time? He’s going down to Virginia for the vacation. You know the kind of thing he likes, do you not?”

“Oh, perfectly, madam,” said the manager. “Mr. Rasselyer generally reads works of—er—I think he buys mostly books on—er——”

“Oh, travel and that sort of thing,” said the lady.

“Precisely. I think we have here,” and he pointed to the counter on the left, “what Mr. Rasselyer wants.”

He indicated a row of handsome books—“Seven Weeks in the Sahara,” seven dollars; “Six Months in a Waggon,” six-fifty net; “Afternoons in an Oxcart,” two volumes, four-thirty with twenty off.

“I think he has read those,” said Mrs. Rasselyer. “At least there are a good many at home that seem like that.”

“Oh, very possibly—but here now ‘Among the Cannibals of Corfu’—yes, that I think he has had; ‘Among the——’ that, too, I think—but this I am certain he would like—just in this morning—‘Among the Monkeys of New Guinea,’ ten dollars net.”

And with this Mr. Sellyer laid his hand on a pile of new books, apparently as numerous as the huge pile of “Golden Dreams.”

“‘Among the Monkeys,’” he repeated, almost caressingly.

“It seems rather expensive,” said the lady.

“Oh, very much so—a most expensive book——” the manager repeated in a tone of enthusiasm—“you see, Mrs. Rasselyer, it’s the illustrations, actual photographs,” he ran the leaves over in his fingers, “of actual monkeys, taken with the camera—and the paper, you notice—in fact, madam, the book costs, the mere manufacture of it, nine dollars and ninety cents—of course, we make

no profit on it. But it's a book we like to handle."

Everybody likes to be taken into the details of technical business; and, of course, everybody likes to know that a bookseller is losing money. These, I realized, were two axioms in the methods of Mr. Sellyer.

So, very naturally Mrs. Rasselyer bought "Among the Monkeys," and in another moment Mr. Sellyer was directing a clerk to write down an address on Fifth Avenue, and was bowing deeply as he showed the lady out of the door.

As he turned back to his counter his manner seemed much changed.

"That monkey book," I heard him murmur to his assistant, "is going to be a pretty stiff proposition."

But he had no time for further speculation.

Another lady entered.

This time even to an eye less trained than Mr. Sellyer's the deep, expensive mourning and the pensive eye proclaimed the sentimental widow.

"Something new in fiction," repeated the manager, "yes, madam—here's a charming thing—"Golden Dreams"—he hung lovingly on the words, "a very sweet story, singularly sweet, in fact, madam, the critics are saying it is the sweetest thing that Mr. Slush has done."

"Is it good?" said the lady. I began to realize that all customers asked this.

"A charming book," said the manager. "It's a love story—very simple and sweet, yet wonderfully charming. Indeed, the reviews say it's the most charming book of the month. My wife was reading it aloud only last night. She could hardly read for tears."

"I suppose it's quite a safe book, is it?" asked the widow. "I want it for my little daughter."

"Oh, quite safe," said Mr. Sellyer, with an almost parental tone, "in fact, written quite in the old style, like the dear old books of the past,—quite like—" here Mr. Sellyer paused, with a certain slight haze of doubt visible in his eye,—"like Dickens and Fielding and Sterne, and so on. We sell a great many to the clergy, madam."

The lady bought "Golden Dreams," received it wrapped up in green enameled paper, and passed out.

"Have you any good light reading for vacation time?" called out the next customer in a loud, breezy voice—he had the air of a stock-broker starting on a holiday.

"Yes," said Mr. Sellyer, and his face almost broke into a laugh as he answered, "here's an excellent thing, 'Golden Dreams'—quite the most humorous book of the season—simply screaming—my wife was reading it aloud only yesterday. She could hardly read for laughing."

"What's the price, one dollar? One-fifty. All right, wrap it up." There was a clink of money on the counter, and the customer was gone. I began to see

exactly where professors and college people, who want copies of Epictetus at 18 cents, and sections of "World Reprints of Literature" at twelve cents a section, come in, in the book trade.

"Yes, judge!" said the manager to the next customer, a huge, dignified personage in a wide-awake hat, "sea stories? Certainly. Excellent reading, no doubt, when the brain is overcharged as yours must be. Here is the very latest—'Among the Monkeys of New Guinea,' ten dollars, reduced to four-fifty. The manufacture alone costs six-eighty. We're selling it out. Thank you, judge. Send it? Yes. Good morning."

After that the customers came and went in a string. I noticed that though the store was filled with books—ten thousand of them at a guess—Mr. Sellyer was apparently only selling two. Every woman who entered went away with "Golden Dreams," every man was given a copy of the "Monkeys of New Guinea." To one lady "Golden Dreams" was sold as exactly the reading for a holiday, to another as the very book to read *after* a holiday; another bought it as a book for a rainy day, and a fourth as the right sort of reading for a fine day. "The Monkeys" was sold as a sea story, a land story, a story of the jungle, and a story of the mountains, and it was put at a price corresponding to Mr. Sellyer's estimate of the purchaser.

At last, after a busy two hours, the store grew empty for a moment.

"Wilfred," said Mr. Sellyer, turning to his chief assistant, "I am going out to lunch. Keep those two books running as hard as you can. We'll try them for another day and then cut them right out. And I'll drop round to Docken and discount the publishers and make a kick about them and see what they'll do."

I felt that I had lingered long enough. I drew near with the Epictetus in my hand.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Sellyer, professional again in a moment. "Epictetus? A charming thing. Eighteen cents. Thank you. Perhaps we have some other things there that might interest you. We have a few secondhand things in the alcove there that you might care to look at There's an Aristotle, two volumes—a very fine thing—practically illegible, that you might like, and a Cicero came in yesterday—very choice—damaged by damp—and I think we have a Machiavelli, quite exceptional—practically torn to pieces, and the covers gone—a very rare old thing, sir, if you're an expert."

"No thanks," I said. And then, from a curiosity that had been growing in me and that I couldn't resist, "That book—'Golden Dreams,'" I said, "you seem to think it a very wonderful work?"

Mr. Sellyer directed one of his shrewd glances at me. He knew I didn't want to buy the book, but, perhaps, like lesser people, he had his off moments of confidence.

He shook his head.

“A bad business,” he said. “The publishers have unloaded the thing on us, and we have to do what we can. They’re stuck with it, I understand, and they look to us to help them. They’re advertising it largely and may pull it off. Of course, there’s just a chance. One can’t tell. It’s just possible we may get the church people down on it, and, if so, we’re all right. But short of that we’ll never make it. I imagine it’s perfectly rotten.”

“Haven’t you read it?” I asked.

“Dear me, no!” said the manager. His air was that of a milkman who is offered a glass of his own milk. “A pretty time I’d have if I tried to *read* the new books. It’s quite enough to keep track of them without that.”

“But those people,” I went on, deeply perplexed, “who bought the book. Won’t they be disappointed?”

Mr. Sellyer shook his head. “Oh, no,” he said, “you see, they won’t *read* it. They never do.”

“But, at any rate,” I insisted, “your wife thought it a fine story.”

Mr. Sellyer smiled widely.

“I am not married, sir,” he said.

STEPHEN LEACOCK.



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Methods of Mr. Sellyer* by Stephen Leacock]