

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

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IT was the sort of summer morning I still remember with a homesick catch in my throat when I think of Alaska. High blue sky, with a few clouds clustered around the peaks. The sun just topping the mountain; the east side of the valley still in shadow. The indescribable mingled scents of salt water and forested hillsides and high melting snow fields.

I drew deep breaths of that air as I walked down the long wooden sidewalk toward the little one-room reading room and library. I was seventeen, and taking charge of this library for the summer was my first job. There was a shelf of Alaskan books and a long writing table and a sign "Tourists' Information;" and though most of the townspeople were too busy to read in tourist season, on boat day there was always a steady stream of visitors.

This morning there were two boats lying beside the wharf under the high mountain; and although I reached the reading room before nine, a group of tourists were already waiting outside the door. All morning I looked up Alaskan books and answered questions about the early days on the White Pass Trail and gave directions to Soapy Smith's grave. It was almost noon, and except for myself the room was momentarily empty, when the door opened and a grey-haired gentleman came in alone.

He did not ask the usual questions nor write the usual post-cards. Instead he began to examine the cases behind my desk, the shelves of miscellaneous books that made up the town's winter reading. His comments puzzled me.

"Now here's a good book," he would say. "Went through five editions." Or, "Oh yes," as though greeting an old friend, "I'm glad you have this one." Then in surprise, "Now how in the world did this ever get way up here?"

I looked. "This" was a brown book containing, I knew, a long patriotic poem by an author I had never heard of.

"Someone must have given it to the library," I explained. "We got most of our books that way."

"Ah yes." He opened the copy. "Inscribed by the author, of course. You know," he twinkled at me and lowered his voice confidentially, "I knew that book was no good, but the author

was so convinced that he had done a great service for his country in writing it that I didn't have the heart to turn it down."

My complete bewilderment must have amused him, for he came over to my desk.

"Didn't you ever think of publishing a book?" he asked me. I thought of certain poems in the last Normal School annual, and blushed to my hair. Whether I would have gathered courage to tell him about them, I do not know, but suddenly there were voices outside the door.

"Here he is," someone said. "We've been looking all over town for you. What is this, Major, a busman's holiday?"

Actually my friend looked guilty.

"Not at all," he answered. "I always stop when I see a good-looking librarian. (That was brazen flattery, for I was pale and plain).

"Won't you sign the visitors' book before you go?" I managed to stammer.

"Of course," he answered, doing so. "And as he turned to the door, he added, "And don't forget, when you write that book, you send it to me."

Before he was out of sight, I was over at the writing table. There was the publisher's name on the unknown poem, "G. P. Putnam's Sons." And there was the signature in my visitors' book, "George H. Putnam."

I should be able to add that I did write that book and he did publish it. It is not my fault that I cannot. Very young, and too shy to remind him of the meeting, but thinking hopefully of coincidence, I did send a bundle of poems carefully away; and in due course received them back again with disappointment but not surprise.

In fact it was more than ten years later, sitting opposite a Toronto publisher and hearing him say, "You've got the real North here; I think we can bring your book out for you in the spring," that I finally said an affectionate mental good-bye to a twinkling grey ghost going out a library door.