

MY CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

By Robert J. Burdette

LEAF by leaf the roses fall, drop by drop the spring runs dry, one by one beyond recall old-time idols fade and die. It is a world of change, and change comes to each one of us, if we live long enough and have time to wait for it. We worship our idol to-day and hang garlands about his neck; to-morrow some iconoclastic missionary comes along, hits our god with a club and splits his ugly head with an axe, and lo, we make a bonfire of the poor old thing and dance around it singing the new hymns the missionary teaches us, without knowing just what they mean. Yesterday we were shrieking, "God Save the King!" until our throats were sore and the baby couldn't sleep; to-day we are shouting, "Liberty and Independence," and pitching the king's good tea into the briny waters of the harbor.

THE time has been, away back in the cradle days of the great Republic, perhaps, when the man who paid cash "was known in the gates"; "the young men saw him, and hid themselves, and the aged arose and stood up" when he came into the store; the best salesman dropped the chance customer and hastened forward to see what Mr. Readypenny wanted; the merchant himself came out of his private office to shake hands with the steady customer. Denims & Prints used to say that "they wished they had John Readypenny on their books for fifty thousand." In those days the man who paid cash made much of his lone virtue, like unto the man who never does anything in all his life except to get up at five o'clock in the morning, and brags about it so continuously that you are positively glad to read in the paper some morning, that he was found dead in his bed at noon yesterday, and won't get up for—oh, nobody knows how long. In those days the cash customer said, with Job: "I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand." Where is he now? Well, where is Job? The cash customer has had his day. He is now as little regarded as was silver in the reign of Solomon. Even in the day of his exaltation he was a vastly over-rated man. He paid just as much for his goods as did Mr. Tardy Slowpay, who always promised to pay "when he killed his hogs," and then, when the killing time came around, the snow was on the grass again and "the frost was on the pumpkin, and the corn was in the shock, Lorena Riley," he decided that he wouldn't kill that year, and so had the use of his money until such time as he did pay. And, indeed, it is strongly suspected that Denims & Prints made Mr. John Readypenny pay the interest on neighbor Slowpay's bill.

THEY are honest in the homage they pay Mr. Slowpay to-day, at any rate. This is his day. It may be that there are yet, in the smaller towns, on the frontier and on the reservations, stores where the cash customer is regarded with the old-time respect and deference. But in the great centres of trade he has been turned down. The "forty-acre stores," where the shopper can buy anything from a buttonhole to a cattle ranch, have no use for him. He is in the way of the floor-walker. He gets in the road of better customers who have everything "charged." He bothers the salesmen and makes extra work for the young ladies who sit at the tables of the money-changers. He is everywhere treated with scant courtesy. He is inconsiderate and inclined to be impertinent. He wants to know the price of an article before he buys it. Then, having decided to take "so much" worth of it, he wants it right away, and grumbles, and looks at the clock, and makes sarcastic remarks about the flight of time while he waits for his change. Away with this bullying cash customer—this tiresome man who pays as he goes! Mr. Slowpay does not pay as he goes, because he is waited upon promptly and goes with comet-like celerity, and like the comet, it is hard telling when he will return.

Now, all this sounds so much like heresy that it has kept you awake. But experience and observation convince me that I am correct, as, indeed, I usually am. Long years have I done all my shopping on the convenient basis of the "transfer," and the grocer's book, so warmly approved by "Colonel Carter." But one day, not so long ago, I changed my business methods to the cash system. I did not do this voluntarily. I yielded to the arguments of friends who advised me "for my own good"—a species of advice which is peculiarly distasteful to me. I yielded to the advice—I call it advice because the "Century Dictionary" says "bulldozing" is slang, and if I am not a purist in the use of words, I am nothing—I say then, I submitted to be guided, against my own better judgment, by the "suggestions" of my friends.

THE first time I went shopping under the new rule was last December—it was some time after its adoption, because shopping for cash requires certain items of preparation which the "charging" expedition has no need to consider. I went into the permanent World's Fair building, which I am accustomed to honor with my patronage, and purchased some Christmas trifle at an expense of several cents. You don't want to strike a very stiff gait on the first quarter when you are paying cash. I said to the salesman, in a tone of voice somewhat louder, perhaps, than was really necessary: "I will pay for this now; I always pay cash for all my purchases." I said to my approving Conscience, who stood beside me, patting me on the back: "That'll put the spring into his heels; just watch him jump." I thought it would have the same effect upon him that a tip has upon a waiter. But the man only looked at the crisp, bright bill I handed him with a discontented expression creeping over his countenance, and said: "Haven't you anything smaller than this?" And proudly, and still more loudly, I answered him nay; adding, which was also unnecessary, perhaps, that it was the smallest I had. I did not volunteer the equally interesting information that it was likewise all that I had, and, moreover, that it was the first and only bank note of that denomination I had seen in three months. I do not tell everything I know. Not all at once, and to the same person. If I did, in two weeks I would have but one friend left to whom I could tell anything—and I do not like to get into the habit of talking to myself. The salesman sighed, and as he went away I heard him remark to the floor-walker that this wasn't a bank. By-and-by—that is, some time during the same day, although not until afternoon—the man came back with my change. It was not all in pennies. Oh, no, not all of it. Part of it was in bank bills—the nastiest, dirtiest, greasiest bills, I think, I ever handled. I said, pleasantly:

"There is no discount on this change."

THE salesman looked tired, and said they seldom allowed any discount on purchases under eight cents. I told him I didn't mean on the purchase, but on the change. I said: "It is above par; there are one hundred and ten cents on the dollar." This was a crusher; I left the unhappy man to think it over, and went to another counter. I handed the salesman there in return for my purchase the ragged bill that smelled more of kerosene and cheese than the whole one did of turpentine and codfish. He didn't want to take it at first, but when I threatened to carry it back to the pin man, he relented and walked away, holding it out at arm's length and gasping for breath. While waiting for him to return, which he did before the street cars stopped running, a cash-boy came rushing by in great excitement saying that one of the lady cashiers had fainted. Some time afterward I saw him returning, reading "The Spectre of Gory Gulch," and carrying an empty goblet upside down, from which the last drops of ice water were slowly trickling down upon his unconscious feet. Poor child! He was so tired that he quite forgot he was waiting on a lady cashier and not on a cash customer. My hopes for the cashier revived, because I knew that she would not be hurried to her death by unwise dosing with ice water. I felt somewhat apprehensive for the boy, however. Had they come to me I could have prescribed for the cashier, and filled the prescription then and there. I had a number of one dollar bills which held in solution a great variety of restoratives, stimulants and sedatives. When the man came back with my change, he apologized for giving it to me entirely in pennies. I did not mind that, however, when I looked them over. I had often wished that I had some flame-eaten and cinderous relics of the great Chicago fire. So I thanked him, and asked if the young lady was better. He said yes; she was able to sit up, but the doctor said she was liable now to die at almost any time. I said: "So was Methusalem." And it being now long past the time for closing the store, indeed the night watchman was impatiently waiting for me to get my change and go away, so that he might lock up the store, punch the detective time register full of holes and go to bed, I did not wait to hear the salesman's bitter retort, but hurried away to the railway station. It was closed for the night. I therefore walked home, because it was too far to run and I cannot fly. On my way through a dark and lonely street two men stopped me and ordered me to "stand still and hand over." I promptly handed them a two dollar bill, when they turned and fled, crying out to me not to shoot. I observed as I returned the money to my pocket that it smelled to a shade like a paper shell loaded with the cheapest kind of powder. No wonder they ran.

THE next day my friends said: "Now, don't you feel much better than if you had run up a big bill?" I hadn't had time to analyze my feelings. I had spent fifty-nine cents railway fare, eighty cents for luncheon, stayed in town all day, and managed by persistent and patient effort to buy two articles costing me, in the aggregate, fifty-eight cents. The other nine Christmas presents on my list, which I needed most of all, I would have to go in and buy some time when the days were longer. So I couldn't say just what would be the verdict concerning the economy of shopping on the cash system. "Well," my friends said, "you ought to have some sense at your time of life—not much, but just some. You should know enough to take a transfer and pay for all your purchases at once."

If it were not for a man's friends he would probably go through life without finding out more than one-half his deficiencies or any of his faults. So I thanked them very cordially and rushed up-stairs and locked myself in my den, and gave myself up to tranquil thought and sweet meditation. My pleasure must have shone out of my countenance, for as I stood at the window, thinking what kind and thoughtful friends it had pleased Heaven to send me, and how grateful I ought to be, my neighbor's cat—the blackest cat that ever made a shadow on the brow of night—came across the lawn on the lookout for a casual sparrow or some unhappy young robin evicted from the nest by his stronger brethren. She happened to glance at me, as I stood there smiling. With one horrified shriek she sprang up in the air as high as a theatre hat, and descending to the lawn, had the awfulest fit I ever saw any two cats have. I did not see the entire performance, because I observed some little children coming down the road, and considerably drew the window shade until they got by. When I looked out again poor puss had recovered sufficiently to drag herself home, and crawl far, far under the sheltering barn.

TWO or three days later I went to town with the unexpired remnant of my Christmas shopping list. I bought everything I wanted early in the day, with the old-time rush, and felt proud to think that I added some Christmas presents for myself to the list, some few things which I did not need at the time, not more than four-fifths of which were utterly, hopelessly, and forever useless to me at any time, living or dead. You see, in the delight of feeling the familiar "transfer" in my hand, I quite forgot that I was going to pay cash for these articles. But time flies—at least, it flies in most places, everywhere, in fact, except in jail and at the transfer counter—and soon I found myself at that grim desk of settlement. As I approached it I saw the face of the parapet was thronged with a strong body of feminine shoppers, from the midst of whom I perceived a man emerge and sneak feebly away to a position some little distance in the rear of the assaulting column. I pitied the poor creature. Smiling scornfully, I elbowed my vigorous way up to the counter. I would show these scrambling women how to do business. "Here!" I cried, in a stern, peremptory, hand-saw kind of voice, "attend to this right away, please! I haven't time to stand around here all day!"

SOMEHOW it is extremely disagreeable to have a remark of your own, made in a public place, followed by a subdued—yet not too subdued—ripple of laughter. And your feeling of annoyance is deepened when you observe at the same time that people are looking alternately at each other and then at you. You don't really know they are laughing at you, and yet you feel uncomfortable. So I said the same thing again, but I couldn't just get the same rasp on it I had the first time, and the smiles around me were much louder and more general. Then I leaned far over the counter and shook my transfer at everybody who came in sight. This provoked some comment on the part of the besiegers, but the garrison didn't appear to mind it very much. After a while I began to grow faint in the knees. A wrathful woman near by arose from her chair and said she was going to see the proprietor and either get her goods or have her money back, which, considering that she was even then doing her level best to pay her money in, was a fair probability. Away she sailed with her money in her hand, and I gratefully sank down in the chair she had vacated. I did not sink down very far. Straightway a tall, impressive-looking matron, with the air of a woman who sayeth to her son-in-law, "Go," and he goeth, said to me, with a voice like a hail from a mackerel sloop: "Young man, would you object to giving that chair to a lady?" She had no need to say so much; the first two words of her invocation settled me. When anybody sizes up the many birthdays that are registered on my face, and then looks me sweetly in the eyes and says, "young man" to me, that's enough. I will rise to that fly on the sunniest day or under the dullest sky that ever laughed or frowned on the brook. She had that chair so quick she thought I was "scart," but I "wa'n't," not the least bit.

SO the siege went on. Sometimes the entire garrison disappeared for minutes at a time, in a vain search for some unheard-of things which the woman wasn't certain had been bought in her own name, Abbott, or her married sister's, Ziegenfuss. Finally it transpired that they had been charged to her niece, Amanda Mollony. Another besieger—a man—made Rome howl for about fifteen minutes about a special order; then when they took his transfer, it was discovered that he had done all his shopping at another store, nearly a mile away, and had only wandered into this one to get his lunch. Once or twice I got a real good place where I could shout at the garrison when it went behind the inner works to look for a package, but each time some pleading daughter of Eve would inform me that "she was in such a hurry, and she must catch such a train, and it would be, oh, such an accommodation, and would I be so kind—?" It wasn't quite so promptly effective as the "young man" cast, but it worked. I was plainly regarded as an interloper, and was made to feel that the rest of the besiegers would forget their own individual rivalries any minute in order to make common cause against me. I was bayoneted in the ribs with elbows of varying degrees of intensity, and once when I was struggling for a place in the front row, a sweet-faced, motherly-looking lady that you couldn't help loving, asked me if "this was the ladies' transfer counter?" and I turned infidel at once. The day was declining, and the crowd was increasing. I had bought everything I wanted and several things I didn't want, I didn't intend to ask for a cent of credit or a day's time, I had my money in my hand and was just crazy to pay for my purchases and get away before night should come.

BUT I couldn't catch the eye of anybody who would take my money. I gave up at last, in utter despair. I found a vacant chair so far in the rear of the line that no woman would look at it, and nailed fast to the floor so that no one could make me move it nearer for her. I sat down, drew out my note-book and went to work on an article I had most solemnly promised the editor of THE LADIES' HOME JOURNAL he should have in hand early that morning, all the time keeping one eye on the garrison behind the "transfer" and shouting, "Hi, there!" at spasmodic intervals. Fate, who is oftentimes kind to me, saw me sitting there, forsaken by men and run over by women. She sent me reinforcements. Reinforcements? She sent me relief. The rescuing party looked down upon me.

"What are you doing here?" she said. I told her. A light of laughter came into her blue eyes.

"Give me your money and transfer," she said. I obeyed in the humble manner of a broken-spirited man who had been ordered around and pushed out of the way by many women all afternoon. I held my breath as I watched the heroic little figure charge up to the desk. While I was still holding it she returned.

"Man!" she said—she didn't say "young man," she has made me too many birthday presents—"man, here is your change and your side-slip; now you may go home." I was not long in starting.

I AM constrained to admit that women may shop more advantageously on the cash system, but it is not in the way of man. I cling to the good, easy old way where you hand your "transfer" over the heads of everybody in the line, and say in one breath, "Purchysame-carrobagsmastbrosstreesta—charge," which by interpretation is, "These goods have been purchased by the same person whose name appears hereon; will you be so kind as to send them to this address, in care of the baggage-master at Broad Street Station and charge them to the account of the purchaser? Thank you; good afternoon." And that's all there is of it for the next thirty days; then it clouds up and begins to rain; there is a great deal of thunder, attended by atmospheric disturbances, with mean temperature and local cyclones.

That evening I heard the rescuer telling a visitor something which I could but vaguely comprehend. "I wish," she said, "you might have seen him sitting there. Of all the meek, subdued, crushed, flattened-out men you ever saw, he was the meekest. Even the cash-boys snubbed him, and just before I spoke to him he raised his hat to a scrub-woman and called her sir. He would have been there yet if I hadn't found him."

I don't know for certain about whom she was talking, but it didn't sound respectful. The time was when the sisters in the household were not permitted to sit down at the table with their brothers, and they spoke to their brothers only after receiving permission to do so. Eh? Where was it? Er—among the Chinese, I think, or the Afghans, or somebody. When was it? Oh, about 900,000 years ago, in another, better world than this, where neither specie payments nor the transfer were known.

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