



A MARKET FOR EVERYTHING

By Robert J. Burdette

I SUPPOSE that long ago, long before the war, long even before I was born, when the "oldest Mason" was yet a boy, and the "youngest soldier in the volunteer army" was growing bald, and the "boy preacher" had lost all his teeth and gone blind, so long ago that even the ill-natured people who can remember when your father

had to work for a living, have forgotten, this trading old world was buying and selling; one side telling awful fibs about the scanty margin of profit, which was really a dead loss, and the other side trying to beat down the price, and telling equally awful whacks about another place, not very far down the street, where they had been offered the same thing at a much lower price. I don't positively know all this, you understand; I just suppose it was the case. Things were arranged on the shelves, and tumbled on the bargain counter, and the big show windows were resplendent with samples unlike anything in the whole store, when I came ashore. Being a stranger I simply fell into the ways of the people of the country. When I first went into business I was a beggar, because that was the way in which all the other citizens of my age and inexperience began business. I didn't earn a cent for a long time; didn't do a stroke of work; didn't ask for work, and wouldn't have accepted any had it been offered me—no, not at any wages. I woke up and demanded something to eat. When I got it I went to sleep—if I felt like it; if I didn't I compelled some busy, industrious member of the firm to amuse me until I was tired of it. And no matter who went without, I was provided for. Those were the "good old times" you sometimes hear people talk about as having reigned so long ago. There has been nothing but hard times since those days of unproductive idleness. If we want to see such times again in this distracted land we must go back to primitive conditions—quit working altogether, eat, sleep and play. That's my platform for universal happiness.

WHEN I first went into business I was a buyer. Everything was high—away up. Every man with whom I traded told me there had never been such hard times; said his expenses were something terrible; that wages were higher than the stars. When I said that mine were lower than Nadir County groundnuts he said yes, that was so in my line, but in all other trades they were out of sight. There was a tariff higher than the Chinese wall on everything he handled, he said; all the cattle in Texas had been driven by the intense cold away over into Mexico, and that sent leather up so high that most people were wearing their shoes on their heads this year; then the mild, open winter had been so warm, there being no snow, it had killed all the wheat, and flour was, therefore, an article for royal consumption only at the present price; the long drought had destroyed all the root crops, and the continuous rains had blighted the corn. There had been so little snow that all the logs in the Northwest and Maine had been hung up in the woods, and lumber was so high they were using it to build balloons; times were dreadful. So, indeed, they were. Everything was against me when I was a buyer. But after awhile—buy and buy, that is—I prospered, and had something to sell. Straightway these same men told me that free trade had opened the doors of the world into competition with me; wages had gone down so far that their hands had to fish for their money on payday; labor didn't cost the time of a woman even—which is absurd; the market was overstocked for the next two years, and there was no demand for my wares anyhow; however, if I wanted to leave the goods, they would give them shelf room for a little while, and if they could sell them they would, after deducting insurance, storage, rent, general wear and tear, commission and ramage, allow me what they thought was right after taking out a fair profit for themselves. These things also caused me much to wonder. However, I had before this time observed that when I drove to town on a winter day the cold, chilling wind blew in my face all the way, and when I turned around to come home again the wind veered just as suddenly and blew in my back every mile of the return trip. So I thought it was one of the ways of the world, as I had never been here before, and was prepared thereafter for any amount of fickleness and "facing both ways."

BUT this, also, I discovered—it had been discovered a great many thousand times by a great many thousand people before my time, but nobody had discovered it for me—that in a world so big as this, wherein so many millions of people were buying and selling all the time, there was a market for everything a man had, if only he could find the market. At first, when a buyer said he didn't want my goods I took them home and cast them in the fire. This, also, was not profitable. But, watching my brethren, the buyers and sellers, very closely, I soon learned, although I was not a political economist by birth or education, all my people being Baptists, that, free trade or high tariff, the business of the world went on, and somebody wanted everything there was in it, and a few people got it—the most of it. What I mean is—I find that no man and but very few women can discuss questions of political or domestic economy so as to be more than half understood by anybody else, and not quite so much as that by themselves, and not at all by each other—what I mean is, that when one man does not want your goods another one does. After that light glimmered slowly into my consciousness I went home and put out the fire. Fuel is high, I said, and I can keep warm by hustling, and I will have no further use for a mercantile crematory. So I sold the furnace to a man who sells hot pitch to the sons of Anak who review your novels, and set out to look up the man who was dying to buy what I was starving to sell. I found him. And I send this word of encouragement to other small dealers in a retail way like myself. It is easy to find this man. All along the way to his shop are fingerboards standing at all the corners and cross-roads, plainly marked, "Declined with thanks." They lead straight to his door, so that the wayfaring man, though he know more than he can conceal, need not err therein. The first time I paused before one of these chilling fingerboards (on the reverse of it is the despairing legend, "This way out") it nearly broke my heart, though my grief was strangely mingled with a desire to break the editor's head. I ascertained, on looking more closely, that the milk over which I was weeping was not spilled, neither was the pitcher broken. I went on to the next place, and the next, and the next one after that, and a little farther down the street, and around the corner, and lo, the man I was after, waiting for me! And he is there to-day, in the same old stand, waiting for you.

IN my own line I always carefully copied the declined article, because the careless thumb marks and the blue pencilings of the "reader" do most cruelly give away ancient manuscript. But clad in new gear, with bright, smiling face, washed in its own tears, shining like the dawn, timidly knocking, tip-toeing in and saying its "howdy" as sweetly as though never before had it seen the interior of an editor's lair, and had never been nearer a printing-office than it had been to Heaven—why, on one of its patient journeys it comes at last into the presence of a real editor—an editor with some sense, an editor who recognizes genius when he sees it: a big-hearted, great-souled, brainy scholar who ought to be President of this United States if it were not that we need such editors far, far more than we need Presidents—such an editor as the reader even now has in her mind's eye. Into his presence your manuscript comes, and is welcomed with open arms and a generous check. Ah, we have met such an editor, all of us, at one time and in one place or another, and grappled him to our hearts with hooks of steel, and we have worked him for all he is worth.

To be sure, one buyer cannot furnish a universal market. Very few men can afford to keep a junk shop. A man is foolish who, having cavalry boots to sell, rings the visitors' bell at a convent school. Salt is good, but you don't want to ship it by the ton to Syracuse on commission. Ice is a good thing, too, and keeps better in December than in July. But if I had a shipload of it I wouldn't try to sell it to the steward of an Arctic expedition. If I had gunpowder to sell I wouldn't take a barrel of it to a man who is fighting a prairie fire. My great paper on "The Divine Sovereignty of Law" I did not sell to Herr Least, whose journal, "The Red Volcano," is the organ of the Anarchists. You have read, of course, my pamphlet on "Wealth, the Only True Manhood," but not in "The Ditch-Diggers' Monthly." But all these things, and many more of the same kind, I sold just as soon as I found the man who wanted them.

AND I am sure it is the same way in all the other lines of trade. Don't be afraid of overstocking the market; there are always more buyers than sellers. That's one reason why a peddler always becomes rich. He trots around all over the land hunting his buyers at their doors; running them down; dodging a missile at this gate, fending off a dog at the next, fleeing from a housewife's wrathful voice at the next, and unloading his wares at the fourth. The dog, and the hostile stone, and the ire of the busy man or woman who will have none of you—these things are all in the plan. You count on these incidents. If you don't they will counter on you. They may, anyhow.

Why just look at the things that people buy—buy, and pay good money for. Look at the things people buy when they go down to the seashore: souvenirs—think of it, "souvenirs"—Heaven save the mark!—souvenirs of a little seaport, which are manufactured at an inland town in Indiana, and which the same people can buy much more cheaply in the lone store at their native hamlet of Waycross Siding, in Arizona or Missouri, than they can at Pacific Village. Look at the books people buy. And what is marvelous beyond the range of wonder, look at the books they read! And the stories and poetry in the magazines, which the editors—ordinarily sensible men—buy and pay for. You can write better ones; so can I—have done it lots of times. I have been seen coming down the long, dark, lonely stairway of the "Illustrated Monthly Declinedwithanks," swallowing a lump in my short throat that would kill me if it should turn around and get lengthwise, and with a large slab of valuable manuscript folded flat, concealed under my coat so deftly that the most desperate and lynx-eyed literary burglar, lying in wait for just such a gem-laden caravan, would never suspect it was there. And the very next week out would come the "Monthly Declinedwithanks" with a story—well, you and I would die with mortification if such a thing, such hopeless rubbish, should come out over our name—and a poem with only four stanzas and not over three kinds of metre, whereas I had just offered them one five times as long for half the money, with a different metre in each stanza, a step-ladder line at the beginning, a zigzag in the middle and a scare word at the end. But, let me assure you, you can get rid of it, step-ladder, zigzag and all, if you can only find the man who wants it. Go a-gunning for him. He's your lawful prey.

LOOK at the things people bought at the World's Fair—things they had no more use for than they had for a section of field artillery. Men bought canes, out on the Fair grounds, paying fifty cents therefor. When they went home, lo, the same canes in a rack at the corner cigar store—marked, "Your choice for ten cents"—had been there for five years. If the man bought cigars enough, the tobacconist would give him one of them. Go into a store and look at some of the garments, ready-made, waiting for customers. Look at some of the hats, bonnets, neckties—things you are convinced that it wouldn't be possible to hire any human being to wear; things you would even hesitate about putting into a "missionary barrel." Well, nobody gives them away; the man sells them, some time, at some price, to somebody. That should encourage you—I mean, it does greatly cheer and encourage me, who have a good deal of junk on hand that I would be greatly tempted to burn, but for past experience. "Nothing is lost." There are some things we can't find, I know, but they are not lost—merely mislaid; not lost, but gone behind something. Have courage then and patience; whatever may be your work in the world, whatever you make, whatever you have to sell, somebody wants it; there is somewhere a buyer for it who will be disappointed if he doesn't get it. If you can't sell it anywhere else, after you have tried every other place in the world, there is always the omnivorous paper mill. That, at least, is secure.

Oh, of course, one thing I forgot to mention: there is one indispensable requisite for salable goods. Salt is good, "but if the salt have lost his savor, where-with shall it be salted?" It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men."

But are there any honest, unpurchasable people? Yes, plenty of them—some of them in every Christian community; they have been found even among the heathen. You may sometimes find them in Vanity Fair. But they are not living there—just passing through. And there are yourself and myself. "We." Oh, well, we have no need to worry; let me tell you this—no one will ever buy us, unless it be quietly known on 'Change that we are for sale.

And if we be not for sale men and women will soon find it out. It won't take very long to establish the fact that we are no chattels. But, in our eagerness to make this known, it will be a very grave mistake if we hang out the sign: "Not for sale."

Robert J. Burdette