

AN OFFICE BOY REMEMBERS 1902

By STITH THOMPSON

AS A HIGH SCHOOL BOY in Indianapolis at the age of sixteen in 1902, I found that my late afternoon and Saturday job in a law office demanded a full-time worker and I was no longer needed. Through J. W. Fessler, a friend of my father and a rising young lawyer, and by means of a phone call to his friend, W. C. Bobbs, I was given work in the Bobbs-Merrill shipping room for all my spare time. Some temporary financial reverses of my father made this place very welcome.

In those days the Bobbs-Merrill Company was already a prestigious publishing house, and I found the two years there very important as a part of my education. The Company occupied a four-story building on Washington Street on part of the present site of the L. S. Ayres Company. The first floor was devoted to a store for retail books and stationery—which years later was taken over by W. K. Stewart. As I recall it, this was an extraordinarily large and well-equipped retail house. On the second floor were the editorial rooms where the editor, Hewitt Hanson Howland, presided. We knew him, of course privately, as H.H.H. In the rear of that floor was the shipping room. The third floor was the law department, from which the smell of the sheep-bound books penetrated to the regions below. The fourth story I suppose was storage space, though I avoided the upper regions.

In the shipping room were huge bins each filled with one of the titles then in demand. Soon I was initiated into

the necessary skills—opening great boxes of books that came in from the printers and binders, packing outgoing boxes economically and efficiently and, above all, wrapping bundles properly for shipment. We unwrapped incoming manuscripts before taking them to H.H.H. Some of these were in longhand, occasionally in pencil, and one of the girls in the office spent her time making fair copies before they went out to the referees.

These were the days of the illustrated novel. We would unwrap the large drawings and admire the lovely ladies of Howard Chandler Christie before they went in to the editor.

In due time I received a promotion, not in salary, which remained at five dollars a week, but in prestige, for Mr. Howland had me copy his letters every evening. These letters, typed with copying ribbon, were entered in large, thin paper books and pressed between damp blotting paper. Eventually I became so skillful that I left only the suspicion of a smear. I had curiosity enough to learn some of the secrets of acceptance or refusal of manuscripts.

And I saw something of the authors themselves—not only the Bobbs-Merrill writers but others who dropped in and chatted with the editor. I am not certain of all these, but I seem to remember Meredith Nicholson, Mrs. Mary Hartwell Catherwood, Charles Major, Booth Tarkington, George Ade, Harry Leon Wilson, and James Whitcomb Riley. I recall taking proofs of *The Main Chance* out to Mr. Nicholson and spending an afternoon setting up sectional bookcases for Mr. Riley at his home on Lockerbie Street. Of course I did not get to know these men, but it was at least educational to see them at close range.

Indianapolis was then a very important center for literature, especially when the Crawfordsville group was

added. I heard General Lew Wallace give the dedicatory address for the Soldiers and Sailors Monument. The city felt a most proprietary interest in Riley; and nearly everyone who had any claim to literary taste owned at least one of the special editions of *An Old Sweetheart of Mine* and kept it on the parlor table. At his death in 1916 a line of people two blocks long paid their respects to his remains, which lay in the state house. No one has caught the Indianapolis of my boyhood better than Booth Tarkington—the city of *Seventeen* and *Penrod*, which lay between Meridian and Delaware Streets and Tenth and Sixteenth. But the great ones were moving out, and Mr. Nicholson lived as far away as Thirtieth Street—the Ultima Thule.

Like any great publishing enterprise, Bobbs-Merrill's was a wonderful intellectual stimulus. I read some novels in galley proof, but we could also buy books at a discount—those published by the house at 48 cents and others at 95 cents. And occasionally an unsuccessful edition was dumped into the waste box. I thus acquired a copy of Nicholson's *Short Flights*. But I find to my chagrin that it has disappeared during the moves of sixty-four years.

The career of this great publishing house has been remarkable, for it is one of the very few which has survived the temptation of moving its principal activity to the great Eastern centers. I was especially gratified when I was Dean of the Graduate School to be able to recognize this achievement by the honorary degree we gave to the editor, David Laurance Chambers. His editorship almost spanned the years since I left my duties as office boy.

STITH THOMPSON is *Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of English and Folklore at Indiana University.*