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Little Red Herrings

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Librarians: Today’s Polymaths

“Small and slender, with dark hair and olive skin dramatically set off by light green eyes, Belle Greene had an extraordinary allure...” So begins a chapter in Jean Strouse’s magnificent Morgan: American Financier, a compelling look at John Pierpont Morgan. Morgan may have been America’s richest banker; doubtless, he was one of America’s last great barons. Morgan was not only in the same league with Vanderbilt, Carnegie and Rockefeller, but also in a league of his own. Indeed, at one point he “bailed” out Carnegie during one of Andrew’s more troubled times. He also warded off what would have become America’s Great Depression long before 1929. In 1907, Morgan averted market disaster and lost millions — tens of millions of his own dollars — in the process. Some think the market crash in 1929 would have passed without incident had Morgan been alive.

But who is Belle Greene and what in the world could she possibly have to do with librarians? Greene was the daughter of Richard T. Greene, the man whom W.E.B. Du Bois dubbed one of America’s most gifted black intellectuals, and representative of Du Bois’ “taunting tenth.” Interestingly, both Belle and her father have separate entries in the Dictionary of American Biography, but under different names, and with no cross-referencing.

Belle became Morgan’s librarian when he hired her away from Princeton, where she worked for the princely sum of $40 a month. For the royal sum of $75 a month, Belle Greene became Morgan’s rare book librarian. Belle had a life-long love of rare books and excelled in the process. She soon took over Morgan’s acquisitions and it is to her, and her intelligence, accounting for most of the color spectrum and several world languages; with desk, tables, chairs, and bookshelves long overmatched and much of the floor called into duty to control overflow. Probably best not to expect fast action here.

To be fair, most librarians are remarkably hospitable, to the point that vendor reps in need of a favor are often enough, say during a break in the day’s agenda, offered use of the librarian’s computer, telephone, desk, even the entire office. They make their offices a good place to meet, whether to exchange gossip or actually to start some business. It does not go unnoticed among vendors, whose own offices as often as not are modest setups, that many librarians have pretty nice offices, spacious, bright, technologically up-to-date, ergonomically outfitted, aesthetically attuned. They’re proud of their offices. And why not?

For a vendor there is no more intimate customer moment than when a librarian says come into my office and sit down, then with a touch of drama closes the door and turns to you. Now what, you think, in a flash turning over in your mind you and your company’s entire history here. Are we in trouble? Are they giving us all their business? Usually neither one. Big library decisions are rarely made or delivered in person by one individual. More often, there come out of official committees, groups, meetings; the vendor may have been present at some of these official meetings, usually held in a conference room. And the subsequent decisions are delivered officially, by email or letter. But a briefing on library policies or personalities, a caution about ongoing negotiations from a librarian who might favor your company or from one who favors someone else, these moments of confidence require the closed office door.

Who knows, in the years ahead maybe every forecast for libraries will come true. The patrons at distance, the reference desk virtual, all periodicals online, backfiles discarded, books digitized, shelves of no use. What will be left for bricks and mortar? The café, maybe. But, no doubt, the offices.