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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 libraries? 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’s “talented 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, that we owe Morgan’s famous incunable of Gutenberg Bibles and other such notables.

Belle was her own woman and kept her own counsel. “Just because I am a librarian,” she is reported to have said, “doesn’t mean I have to dress like one.” Ouch! She wore cowgirl gowns and jewels to work. Ah, what a sense of style to note with antidote to the usual laid-back (and sometimes laid-out) sartorial style, or lack thereof. Belle became “the soul of the Morgan library.” Her sense of humor and indomitable wit outsmarted most who thought they knew more.

For example, she smuggled a number of rare items into this country for Morgan by letting examiners find less important things “with great seeming hesitation.” On one such occasion, Belle let the examiners find several unimportant items while she remained as she put it, “very indignant.” The examiners walked away with their catch never knowing they had fished in the wrong pond. Unknown to them were a painting, three bronzes, a special watch and other items she brought back to her boss, the very items for which the visit had been made in the first place. When Morgan saw her haul, Belle reported to a friend, “he & I did a war dance & laughed in great glee.”

When I read over these words not so long ago I thought of the number of times I have to explain what I did for my life’s work. I haven’t smuggled anything, but I have been called upon to do any number of legal and ethical jobs not precisely encompassed by the word “librarian.”

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, these 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.