Words... They're Just Words

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Words...They're Just Words
by John Riley <jdriley@comcast.net>

Times-Picayune Want Ads
Books for sale. Over 400K old books stored in
3 warehouses. Best offer takes them all.
15 Tchoupitoulas St.  555-0199

A
s used book dealer I read the want ads ev-
every day looking for Ing sales, church bazaars,
charity book sales, private book sales, any-
where I can shake loose some fresh stock for my store,
but I had never seen anything quite like this ad. Four
hundred thousand books? It had to be a typo, but
it did mention 3 warehouses, so it could be true.
I picked up the phone prepared to be told that the
ad should have read four thousand books, or four
hundred. Still, it was a lot of books. I waited anxiously
as the phone rang 10, 12, 15 times and
just before I hung up a whined voice answered.

"Prunier’s residence."

"Do you have an ad in today’s paper for some books for sale?"

"Yep. You’re the first guy to call."

"Do you really have four hundred thousand books or is that a typo?"

"I really don’t know how many books are here. I
just took the number of shelves and figured maybe
50 books per. There’s way over eight thousand shelves and
another couple of rooms of about three thousand
unsorted boxes. It’s really quite insane. You
interested?"

"Well it does sound a little crazy. Is this a library
shutting down?"

“No they’re all from my dad’s collection. He has
been collecting for over 50 years. Anatole Prunier.
You must have heard of him if you’re in the used
book biz in New Orleans.

come over now and look around?”

“Absolutely. I’ll meet you in an hour at the
door to the warehouse on Terpsichore. 15 Terpsichore.”

Sure, I know who Anatole Prunier was. Only
the biggest bibliophile that ever lived. The guy was
first in line at every book sale and he was the last to
leave, usually buying whatever was left at the end. I
had seen him at the Salvation Army leaving with shop-
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ping carts full of books. He came into my store nearly everyday and left with at least twenty books. He nearly paid my rent for 15 years. But he was like a plague. When a tag sale was advertised in the paper he would call the homes and beg to come early. He had usually cleaned things out the night before I pulled up at 6 a.m. He was always trying to sneak into book sales early. He even went so far as to hide the night before at the biggest book sale of the year at the Public Library. He pretended to be a volunteer helping to sort books and when it came time to close he slipped under one of the tables and slept there all night so he could be first in the morning. He spent the night hiding books in the bathroom and under the staircase. When I reported him to one of the ladies running the sale she just said “He’s paying for everything. What’s the problem? The money all goes to charity. Now hurry along and buy some yourself”.

He did have deep pockets and he never worked at anything other than buying books. His father had owned half of Storyville and when it was shut down after World War One he had taken over most of the other “Houses” in the surrounding Parish. Anatoile was an only child and even after his father’s death he continued to receive cash payments every morning from his father’s lawyer. From some old timers who knew the family I learned that Anatoile hated his family and that he retreated into a world of reading and book collecting to run away from the rough criminal life that surrounded him. His collecting became more and more obsessive as he grew older. After his wife died and his children moved out his collecting became truly monomaniacal.

A doctor who had made a house call mentioned finding books everywhere in the house. Even the oven and bathtub were overflowing with books. There simply was nowhere to walk or move. He slept on the floor for weeks since he couldn’t get into the house anymore. That’s when he began buying old warehouses south of Canal and filling them too. When he had bought everything in New Orleans he travelled to England after World War Two and tried to buy everything there too. Then he hired agents to keep the books coming after he returned home.

His two sons had left the old man to his bibliomania as long they got their cash in the mail every week, but when the gravy train stopped, they made a beeline for New Orleans and to their father’s house. From the time the sons got there he had been reduced to simply sitting with a blank stare while he muttered over and over “They’re just words...just words.” He had developed what appeared to be Alzheimer’s or some kind of dementia and they were going to have to move him into a home.

From his son Felix, the one that answered the phone, I learned that the two sons were all that was left of the family. Neither of them gave a damn about the collection. It was all just so much pulp as far as they were concerned. They had grown to hate everything about books from long weekends driving around the country being left in the car while their dad bought more books. Felix said he was trying to get on the NASCAR circuit and he was in a hurry to get back to Daytonia. He told me that his brother worked at a gambling casino in New Jersey that he got into through some family contacts. Felix told me that when the cash from his dad stopped coming they called the family lawyer. They were horrified to hear that Anatoile had sold off all of his properties in order to continue his orgy of book buying. The sons were hoping that the money from the sale would pay off some of their gambling debts and bankroll a new race car for Felix. They were hoping to get millions, but they couldn’t figure out why anybody in their right mind would want this stuff. The old man’s muttering in the background only proved to them that books were a waste of time.

“So how much are they worth?” was the first thing that Felix asked me after I had been in the warehouse for about five minutes.

“I’ve only had time to scan the shelves. I would need days to just get a feel for what’s here.”

“Do people really pay good money for this stuff?” he asked with a slack jaw.

“The old man sure did. There’s gotta be some other wackos out there.” piped up Louis, the other son.

“I’ll have to have some time. I probably can’t even afford this. I’ll get you an appraisal and you can put them up for auction.”

“We don’t want to wait. We want the money now.”

“I could talk to some of the heavy hitters in New York and see what I can put together. Give me the catalogue your dad put together and I’ll try to see what kind of dollars we’re talking. I’ll get back to you in two days if we don’t get hit with that hurricane.”

As I went to leave the old man grabbed my hand and blurted “They’re only words...only words.”

“I know pops” snarled Louis.

It was said to see the old warehouse so demoted. He couldn’t even get out of his chair anymore.

Two days later I called back and went over to 15 Tchoupitoulas. I had gotten the go ahead from a syndicate of auctioneers to offer 2 million dollars for the collection that worked out to about four dollars a book. A real bargain for the syndicate. They were stunned after a collection that was legendary in the book trade. Anatoile had spent wildly at New York auctions through his agents there and even though none of the syndicate knew him personally they did know he had bought only the choicest items. After I faxed a portion of the massive catalogue the syndicate called and said they would agree to buy it sight unseen. A collection of this magnitude hadn’t come on the market in decades. They would fly down after the storm to deliver the check.

As I walked over to the warehouse the wind was whipping something fierce, but it appeared that New Orleans had dodged the “Big One” again. When I entered the warehouse the old man stopped me and started his litany “They’re words...only words.” Wow he was gonzo. He needed to get some professional attention real soon. Felix was happy to hear what I had been able to put together. But before I left I wanted to look at some of the books that I had only had time to scan with a flashlight from behind piles of boxes. I wanted to collate a few of the better pieces. Just from reading the catalogue and looking at the bindings I was sure that this was going to be a landmark sale. The syndicate was making out like bandits. Sure there was lots of junk, but that could be sold off or donated to the library for their book sale.

It was too dark to really see much of the collection so I asked the brothers to open up some of the iron hatches on the windows. As they pushed the heavy storm shutters open I reached for a Shakespeare folio dated 1623 on the spine. There were two others just like it sitting on the shelf. My hands trembled as I opened this Holy Grail of all bibliophiles. The light from the open windows had cut into the murky darkness and I could make out what appeared to be shreds of paper falling like snow onto the floor. The weight and heft of the massive tome had turned to air in my grasp. The entire contents were like confetti blowing in the breeze. The binding was intact and beautiful, but that was all that remained. I reached for the other folios and they too opened up a uniform sheet of paper as the wind kicked up from the open windows. I frantically picked up a handful of the chaff and I was struck that all the pieces were black. The white paper around each word had been chewed away leaving only a single word... and wind. The territoires! The world’s most ravenous termites had gotten to the collection. New Orleans was home to a strain of termites that could devour a whole house in a day. They could consume a living oak. They were slowly eating the whole city.

As I stepped out into the storm, the wind in my hair, I faintly heard a voice in my mind saying “I am optimistic about the future of China’s libraries. Annually the University of Hong Kong sponsors with the help of others a library leadership institute. To each institute will come scores of very bright, animated, and enthusiastic librarians. It is inspirational to see them attack the management problems that their small teams are asked to resolve. There are, of course, all sorts of problems for Libraries in China — especially the lack of freedom to select and read all points of view; yet, compared to the past, the stories being played out in most libraries, seem to be much happier than during the previous 60 or 70 years.” See http://www.hkilb.org.hk/about-us.htm for more information.

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