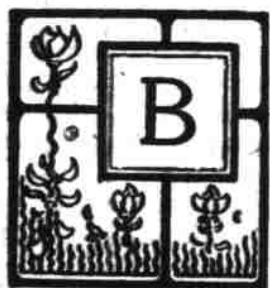


SOME PROSPECT

By Jack Lait

Illustrated by Ian Cohen



BOOK agenting is a trained craft, and may even be made a fine art. It requires much besides the traditional gall. It is a mistake to think that literature can be peddled by

the man who when kicked out of the front door returns by the back door, smiling and suave. Crust is an element; but the big thing that counts is the value of the book in ratio to its price, as you will here see.

People are people, whether they are entertaining a book agent or shopping at a counter. Of course, when one goes seeking merchandise the chances for a sale are much brighter than when one who has merchandise that one may or may not want or can or cannot afford seeks a buyer. But folks are wary of their money in either event.

Therefore the spieler who can cause the highest opinion of his wares, so that they seem great, and the price he carelessly mentions seems mild, is the one who will make the most commission.

The commission usually is 20 per cent of the price. The best "proposition" (a book is a proposition in such cases) is a set of timely or popular material that can make a handsome home library flash, help to fill shelves, furnish welcome reading in fancy binding, obtainable at from \$30 to \$50, payable in installments of gentle size.

Book agents are neither born nor made; they are found. The process of discovery begins with a classified advertisement setting forth a brilliant and lucrative opportunity for light and little work; the word "book" is never mentioned in the ad; it would alarm the candidate.

When he calls to seek the rarest thing under the sun—big money for small effort—the proposition is eased to him. He is shown records, genuine or only inspiring, revealing that others in the same line have made gaudy pay.

The popular superstitions and prejudices against book agenting are deftly attacked by the "teacher" or district manager who is seeking agents, and the aspirant for prosperity is probably hooked, at least on a promise to give the game a tryout.

He is then appointed to arrive next morning and begin a week's tuition. He is given a prospectus (professionally referred to as a "pros") with samples of the bindings, excerpts from the reading matter, sample illustrations and testimonials from great men who got free copies.

The agent has to learn his "pros" by heart, so that he can sing it or whistle it or gargle it or hum it or recite it. He must learn, besides, set selling arguments composed to answer speciously any reasonable question or stifle any unreasonable argument that might be raised by a prospective purchaser, who is known to the trade as a "prospect."

The teacher examines the tyro, refusing angrily to buy the books, and expecting the novice to answer him by rote, but as though with spontaneity, why he should—why he must—buy. Thus the agent can prove that his set of books is a household necessity, an uplift for the children, diversion for the housewife, distraction for the business man, a reference work of clearest merit, an indispensable earmark of the intellectual character of the home, a thing of beauty,

THE butcher could not sell books, but when it came to cutting meat he knew of several tricks that put book selling in the shade.

worth the price asked in the mere paper poundage, a long-felt want and the consummation of any earthly desire that normal mortal might contemplate, before he gets into action.

When he has memorized and mastered all this, he takes his "pros," which is al-

the two sources that have given the world its adventurers, its crooks, its poets, its self-made men—middle aged failures in other endeavors and untried youths just starting out and unwilling to climb the orderly ladders of plodding commerce.



"Wh-what's the meaning of this?"

"It's an order for forty-six sets," said Hyman as calmly as he could.

ways small enough to fold and go into a pocket, so that it will not serve as a danger signal to a prospect, and goes forth into his "territory." Territory is the bounded area in which the agent is franchised to operate. He will not meet competition there from others pushing the same books; and he must not infringe into the territory of his fellows.

Sometimes agents operate in squads, with a submanager along to watch and guide them. They "work" medium-sized towns, subdividing it among the members of the shift, and when they have sucked it dry they move on, en masse, to the next field of prospective prospects for the "pros."

IN A city of 25,000, in Indiana, a gang of half a dozen agents arrived to "plant" sets of the "Unabridged Library of Mark Twain's Classics," together with the "Life of the Author by One Who Knew Him Intimately." The mess went with a year's subscription to a weekly journal and a monthly magazine for scarcely more than the price of the ink to print the order-form—terms, a dollar down and a collector a week for the remainder of lifetime of this generation.

They were a motley lot, drawn from

Of the latter classification there were two—an honor student fresh from an academy, who had worked his way through school by washing laboratory blackboards, and whose parents were bitterly poor; and a recent high school graduate in a fresh water city whose parents were dead and who had a small inheritance that would sustain him while he experimented with life.

Of the ones who had pulled up lame after losing races 'round the flint tracks of competition there were three—a former drug clerk in Atlantic City who had been run out of town because he couldn't help flirting with the girl customers; a former butcher's apprentice in New York who had been refused a raise; and a lubricated, slender, wiry, quick-eyed, well dressed man of about 40, who didn't tell much about his past, but who let it be guessed that he had been an important cog in the machinery of a metropolitan broker's affairs. His name was Tripp, and he was soon nicknamed "Pierp," a take-off on the Christian name of a famous financier, in acknowledgment of his superior manner and his Wall street genesis.

Tripp took his "pros" and went forth on the very first day and sold seven sets,

which was going it strong, for the next and nearest—Cass, the quondam pill roller—bagged only six, whereas Hyman, the used-to-be steak slapper, came back "skunked," having sold none. The academy youth, Leonard, had sold three; Magill, the high schooler, had landed two.

They all ate together in the dingy dining-room of the second-rate American plan hotel where they had all put up, and they exchanged experiences and views and hopes. "Pierp" had earned more than \$50 that day! The gushing promises of the teacher were not, then, impossible. If a man could keep up that pace he could get rich. Even Leonard had coined \$15, and Magill, who never before had earned a dime, had made \$10. So every one except Hyman was in high spirits that night.

On the second evening reunion the total score stood: Tripp, 13; Cass, 9; Leonard, 4; Magill, 2; Hyman, 0. It will be seen that the initial enthusiasm had brought extraordinary results, and that no one could keep up the first day's pace except Hyman, who was still empty handed.

The road manager, a book agent of many years' training, called the ex-butcher aside after the second evening meal and asked him what was the matter. Hyman couldn't explain—he only knew that nobody would let him finish his talk; he knew it word for word, and though he mispronounced a few of the longer ones, he got them all in as long as anyone would listen—but they all cut the butcher off and begged to be excused; that is, they begged at first, and when Hyman resisted they insisted.

The manager filled him with excellent and sage advice and told him to be of good cheer—he would surely bring home a little bacon on the third day; to sharpen his wits and cleave to his courage, to rib up his ambition.

So Hyman smiled and said he'd try. But it was futile. Not every one made a sale on that day, but Hyman hadn't made one at any time, and his jaw sagged as he sat about

and heard the others tell how they had cajoled this or that prospect into being interested or remaining good natured and the like, up to the climax of each incident, the star performance and opus majus of each operation—getting the victim to sign.

Hyman wished himself back behind the counter on Second avenue, hacking off pigs' knuckles or skinning a goose, or whatever it is that is to the butcher's clerk like kicking high and faking a melody is to a chorus girl—plain, humdrum work.

But he had solid stuff in him, had Hyman. He resolved that he would sell a set of the Mark Twains if it took him a year.

"Pierp" had turned in more than twenty signed slips, meaning that he had earned beyond \$100, by Saturday, the sixth night; Cass panted behind with thirteen. Leonard had sold seven, and Magill, in his frank, sweet, civil way, convinced enough prospects to let him turn in six. Hyman, with a hang-dog look and a puzzled sensation, regretted to report that—nothing doing.

Granger, the manager, threw up the sponge. As decently as he could—and the book business is not famous for its parlor manners—he served notice on Hyman that he would be given his railroad fare back to the city next day, that he was hopeless, and no more hotel bills