***THE READING PUBLIC****by S. Leacock*

"Wish to look about the store? Oh, by all means, sir," said the manager of one of the biggest book stores in New York. He called to his assistant, "Just show this gentleman our ancient classics — the ten-cent series." With this he dismissed me from his mind.

In other words he had guessed at a glance that I was a professor. The manager of the biggest book store cannot be deceived in a customer. He knew I would hang around for two hours, get in everybody's way, and finally buy the Dialogues of Plato for ten cents.

He despised me, but a professor standing in a corner buried in a book looks well in a store. It is a sort of advertisement.

So it was that standing in a far corner I had an opportunity of noticing something of this up-to-date manager's methods with his real customers.

"You are quite sure it's his latest?" a fashionably dressed woman was saying to the manager.

"Oh, yes, madam, this is Mr. Slush's very latest book, I assure you. It's having a wonderful sale." As he spoke he pointed to a huge pile of books on the counter with the title in big letters — Golden Dreams.

"This book," said the lady idly turning over the pages, "is it good?"

"It's an extremely powerful thing," said the manager, "in fact it's a masterpiece. The critics are saying that without exaggeration it is the most powerful book of the season. It is bound to make a sensation."

"Oh, really!" said the lady. "Well, I think I'll take it then."

Suddenly she remembered something. "Oh, and will you give me something f or my husband? He's going down south. You know the kind of thing one reads on vacation?"

"Oh, perfectly, madam. I think we have just what you husband wants. Seven Weeks in the Sahara, dollars; Six Months in a Waggon, 6 dollars; Afternoons in an Oxcart, two volumes, 4 dollars 30 cents. Or here, now, Among the Cannibals of Corfu, or Among the Monkeys of New Guinea, 10 dollars." And with this the manager laid his hand on another pile as numerous as the pile of Golden Dreams.

“It seems rather expensive,” remarked the lady.

"Oh, a most expensive book," repeated the manager in a tone of enthusiasm. "You see, it's the illustrations, actual photographs of actual monkeys; and the paper."

The lady bought Among the Monkeys.

Another lady entered. A widow, judging by her black dress.

"Something new in fiction," repeated the manager, "yes, madam, here's a charming thing, Golden Dreams, — a very sweet story. In fact, the critics are saying it's the sweetest thing Mr. Slush has done."

"Is it good?" said the lady.

"It's a very charming love story. My wife was reading it aloud only last night. She could hardly read for tears."

"I suppose it's quite a safe book?" asked the widow anxiously. "I want it for my little daughter."

"A assure you it's perfectly safe. In fact, it is written quite in the old style, like the dear old books of the past; quite like —" here the manager paused with a slight doubt — "Dickens and Fielding and — er — so on."

The widow bought the Golden Dreams, received it wrapped up, and passed out.

"Have you any good light reading?" called out the next customer in a loud cheerful voice — he had the air of a man starting on a holiday.

"Yes," said the manager, and his face almost broke into a laugh.

"Here's an excellent thing, Golden Dreams; quite the most humorous book of the season. My wife was reading it last night. She could hardly read for laughing."

After that the customers came and went in a string. To one lady Golden Dreams was sold as exactly the reading for a holiday, to another as the very book to read after a holiday; another bought it as a book for a rainy day, and a fourth as the right sort of reading for a fine day.

Among the Monkeys was sold as a sea story, a land story, a story of the jungle, a story of the mountains; each time at a different price.

After a busy two hours I drew near and from a curiosity that I couldn't resist said, "That book, Golden Dreams, you seem to think it's a very wonderful book?"

The manager knew that I had no intention of buying the book, so he shook his head. "Frankly speaking, I imagine it's perfectly rotten."

"Haven't you read it?" I asked in amazement.

"Dear me, no!" said the manager. His air was that of a milkman who is offered a glass of his own milk. "A pretty time I'd have if I tried to read all the new books. It's quite enough to keep track of them without that."

"But those people," I went on, deeply puzzled, "won't they be disappointed?"

"By no means!" he said. "They won't read it. They never do."

"But at any rate your wife thought it a fine story," I insisted.

The manager smiled widely. "I am not married, sir."

***NOTES:***

rotten — *(slang)* bad

in a string — one after another