

PARNASSUS JUNIOR

BY

MARIANNEBRISH

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The bookmobile groaned into the curb, scraping its gleaming aluminum side just a little against the rough cement. The three of us took a last deep breath, made sure everything was securely battened down, and swung the heavy door open. People literally poured in, filling the space between the shelves lining the wall in a matter of moments, and tumbling over each other as they tried to see if the newest Zane Grey or Grace Livingston Hill was in its accustomed cubby-hole on one of the top shelves. "Miss, do you have any more baseball stories like this one?" "Mamma, kin I take this book—huh, please?" "Yas'm, I'm sure the card was there, 'cause I knowed I never took it out my own self." "Don't pull all those books out on the floor, Georgie—the nice ladies might not like it." "Do you have any books on slip-covering furniture?" And so it went as we frantically tried to set our thoughts in enough order to answer questions, slip and sort books, and check out the batch as quickly as possible so that the next wave, still standing in line outside, could get in and out again before it was time to move on to the next stop. At last, only a few stragglers remained, lingering over their choice of reading for the next month like true connoisseurs. We hurriedly stuck the last of the books on the shelves, breathed a deep sigh, just to prove to our lungs that we had not completely forgotten them, coaxed the engine into giving a few significant coughs, and started on down the road.

This is a scene which is repeated at least twenty times a day, five days a week in the rolling hills and farmlands of Washington County, Maryland. It is not the first venture of this type in the county, however, but the grandchild of an old wagon, pulled by an equally ancient horse, and guided by a genial, elderly gentleman over the rutted dirt roads of the county in the early years of the century. Leaving the main library in Hagerstown every sunny day, it made its way to most of the small general stores which dotted each cross-road, and left there a carton of the very latest fiction, non-fiction, and magazines. Although this practice was discontinued, the memory was still cherished by the farmers and some twenty years later, in the mid-thirties, the bookmobile, now a shiny black Ford truck of the Model-T variety, set out. Since its shelves were built on the outside, so that the tiny interior could hold its two occupants and a few extra books in case of emergency, it was a fair-weather service with an uncertain schedule and even more uncertain personnel. Its crew was drafted from among those staff members who possessed drivers' licenses, and who happened to be at work at the time when the head librarian definitely decided that a lovely day might really be in prospect and perhaps the mobile should make its rounds after all. There were all kinds of minor mishaps, and now and then a battered book would turn up at the main desk in Hagerstown with the explanation that "I just found it lying along the road, ma'am". Then, with the coming of the war and gasoline rationing, the bookmobile was retired with the promise that some day it would again be revived.

This revival began in 1949 with the formulation of an idea for a new, improved bookmobile. After much discussion and a little outright cajoling by a few determined staff members, the Board of Trustees granted the necessary cash, and work was begun on the outfitting of a Studebaker truck with inside shelves, seating space for three, and a closet or bin in every other available spot. In the library

itself, staff members worked overtime, mailing cards and questionnaires to the farmers. As the questionnaires came pouring back in, tentative routes were mapped, remapped, and then mapped again, although they would not reach the final stage until the bookmobile was in actual operation. A new staff member was added to become the bookmobile librarian, and I was dragged from my habitual cubbyhole in the Children's Room to be informed that even I was going along on "some of the more crowded runs" during the summer. At last, details were complete — or nearly so — and the bookmobile sauntered off one morning in April, 1950, with an air of confidence and much inner trepidation. Since these early runs were only short hops to schools and stops for adults, it wasn't until summer officially arrived and hordes of children descended upon each crossroad, bringing circulation up to an unheard-of nine hundred books per day, that I was drafted.

Looking back over this summer, I find that I cannot remember exactly which day was my first, for all the days were different; all sometimes exciting, but never boring. All left a confusion of impressions upon my mind: impressions of the noise, the jolting, the laughter, and, of course, the sweltering, stifling heat. My duties had been outlined as those of being in charge of the members of the bookmobile branch of the Children's Summer Reading Club, which had originated in the Children's Room as an attempt at interesting the juvenile population in the improvement of their minds during vacation. This year each child had been given a cardboard clown. For every two books he read, he received one dot to stick on his clown's suit. After he had ten dots on the suit, he received a balloon, and after he had accumulated the grand total of twenty dots, he received a certificate stating that he had read forty books. The idea had caught like wildfire, and bookmobilities wanted to join in the fun. Since space was at a minimum and patronage at a maximum in our humble Studebaker, I kept all the clown cards, and I stuck on every last one of those gummed-paper dots. In between times, I was a combination errand-girl, water-girl, book-sticker-upper, and, in fact, just about anything. We were each supposed to be more or less interchangeable in our respective jobs, and we were, except for the fact that we each wished deep down inside that we'd been born with at least six arms and no legs at all.

No day on the bookmobile was a "typical day". Like the tide, we had our spring and neap flow, but even the slowest runs were far from lazy. A composite day with Delilah might serve, however, to give a picture of our trials and tribulations. (Mrs. Whitmore and I had gotten around to christening her during the first week, and, though Miss Cooper held out for Hepzibah for a little while, we soon found that she was no meek and mild Puritan maid and unanimously endowed her with the name Delilah.) We left the cool shade of the library at nine-thirty each Monday through Friday morning, after loading the shelves to the bursting point and putting extra bags of children's books along the floor "in case of emergency". (Definition of emergency: a point reached about eleven every Monday through Friday morning.) At least two staff members bravely set out every day, and on particularly busy days (at least once or twice a week) I tagged along, too. We always started blithely, rested and full of laughter, checking registration cards and reserved books for the day, setting the date stamps, and feeling very benevolent toward all mankind. But this roseate glow would begin to dim appreciably when we hit the outskirts of town where the roads narrowed and be-

gan assuming perpendicular proportions. Studebakers, while very economical, are hardly the last word in comfort, and, from my perch on a stool (there were only two seats), I began to wish about ten every morning that someone would decide to repeal the law of gravity. Washington County roads are said to be concrete reconstructions of Indian paths—presumably on the basis that whatever was good enough for the Indian is good enough for us. Unfortunately, most Indians seemed to prefer going straight up and over hills instead of around. Poor Delilah would charge determinedly at the hills, get about half-way up, and then, as Miss Cooper, who usually drove, was changing gears, give a sickening lurch and a slight drift backwards while we held our breath and shut our eyes. Then, usually with a horrible, ear-piercing grind of gears and a mighty effort, she would plod forward. Meanwhile, the books on the back shelf had fallen off, one of the bags had burst, the closet door had opened and an umbrella had fallen out, usually on my head, but otherwise, we were still intact. This love for the perpendicular extended to a good many of the school buildings, which, since they were each a community center, were our habitual rendezvous. The architects must have been laboring under the theory that anyone wishing an education should be forced to work for one; therefore they had made the schools as inaccessible as possible. The school at Sandy Hook was a prime example. This building was atop a junior-size mountain and its only entrance and exit was a sheer driveway about nine feet wide. Once, in the process of toiling up this steep, Delilah got careless and lost two of the blue letters on her left side, giving her the look of a slightly tipsy Southern belle with her "Washin-ton County" and "Pone 326".

After jolting along over concrete or dirt (pardon me—improved surface!) for anywhere from twenty to forty-five minutes, we could see in the distance a thin line of figures standing patiently along the roadside. As Miss Cooper blew her customary "da-dum, da-dum, da-da-dum" (a tuneless sort of melody she had dreamed up all by herself, which supposedly represented, on Delilah's three-tone horn, someone saying, "The book mo-bile is com-ing"), this single line would be suddenly augmented by people springing up from nowhere. Screen doors banged, people shouted, chickens cackled, dogs barked, and the confusion began. We could expect anywhere from one lonely soul to five or six dozen people to overwhelm us. In the doors they came, the children staggering under their piles of books, for, since we came only once a month to each stop, they were allowed to take out as many as twenty. Most of them, too, were shoed over to "Miss Brish," who was frantically diving into the stack of clown cards and trying to stick on dots, as well as answer questions which ranged from "Do you like dogs?" (we did) to "Do you have a bathroom?" (we definitely didn't). Mrs. Whitmore was slipping (i.e. putting the white title cards back into the pockets), and Miss Cooper was shelving and answering questions as fast as arms and mouth could take her.

We tried to meet the individual demands of a rural reading public as best we could. For the adults, the Homemakers' Club, to which many a farmer's wife belonged, supplied reading lists, and we were careful to keep up-to-date on those. Naturally we kept shelves of mysteries, Grace Livingston Hill's sudsy stories, Zane Grey's rip-roaring westerns, the Jalna series, and all of Frances Parkinson Keyes' many novels. In the non-fiction department, we found increasing demands for the humorous-anecdote type of book, and "Cheap

er By the Dozen", "Father of the Bride", and their kin never remained on the shelves. Travel books were also especially popular—probably because many of our patrons were Mennonites, a religious sect in the county which does not permit its members to read fiction. Our limited shelf space was not all-inclusive, however, and many times special reference questions were taken along back to the library. Some of these questions were completely flabbergasting. They ranged from books on how to rid a dog of worms to volumes of the finest poetry. Of course, any reaction which showed that our public might be increasing its literary aptitude was doubly welcome. Miss Cooper thought she had found such a reaction when a gawky young man asked for some nature stories—"maybe something by Burroughs". Now Miss Cooper's education was bounded by the walls of Penn State, and she naturally connected this request with John Burroughs, a famous naturalist. The next time, when she presented the crestfallen lad proudly with three musty, heavy volumes of nature lore, she discovered her mistake. Mr. Burroughs' first name was not John, but Edgar Rice; his "nature stories" were those centered about the adventures of "Tarzan, Lord of the Jungle".

Almost the only problem in children's books was that of how to keep enough books about horses, dogs, and baseball on the shelves to meet the demand. Many of the children, bred on the ten-cent "comics" that could be bought in the country stores, needed a little guidance in book selection. Their main requirement of a book was that it be thin, with "lots 'n' lots of pitchers". We tried to oblige and yet raise their standards a bit by suggesting well-worn copies of "Winnie-the-Pooh" and "Mary Poppins". Yet, several of our younger patrons astonished us by their reading capacity. One gaunt, unkempt girl, whose only claim to intelligence lay in her deep, bright eyes, asked us one morning early in the summer for a copy of "David Copperfield". We didn't have it with us, but told her we'd bring it for her next time, whereupon she produced a grimy list of books she wanted to read. During that summer, she read much of Dickens, "Little Women", and several other books which I waded through only as a junior in high school. We never knew where she had gotten the titles; when we asked her if she'd liked the books, she merely nodded, quickly and emphatically, never saying a word unless in request for another book. Only her eyes and her shy, intense excitement betrayed her love of reading. Then, there was a boy at an orphanage we visited who began by asking for books on sociology, an amazing request for the bookmobile. We brought him some, and he confessed that he'd been reading a magazine article on some phase of the subject and wanted to know more about it. Next time he asked for "Little Women" and some books on snakes — topics he'd heard mentioned during the preceding month. But these were only exceptions which "proved the rule".

Five or six stops like this one rolled by in a blur of sound until finally, about twelve, we took a precious half-hour off for lunch. Runs were supposedly planned with this half-hour in view, so that we occasionally ate in a churchyard, spreading our lunch on the flat tombstones or on the church steps, and using the creaking pump, found behind many rural churches, to wash our hands and cool our faces. This was living in luxury, however. More often, we simply pulled over to the side of the road, unpacked our mammoth thermos jug of water, and doused our hands and faces thoroughly, then clambered back into Delilah to make ourselves reasonably comfortable and eat. The only disadvantage to this arrangement was that

people of the surrounding community expected us, like the U. S. Mail, to be available in rain, snow, sleet, hail, or lunch hour; and sooner or later, a head would poke around the corner of the door with an apologetic "I hate to bother you, but . . ." Once a month we toiled up a mountain to a spot on the summit where a memorial had been built to honor the newspaper correspondents killed in the Civil War. The place was tranquil and lovely with its mossy green grass, trees spreading a cool, deep shade overhead, and its unsurpassable view of the valley nestling below. It was always a little breath-taking, even though we knew what to expect, and it left us refreshed and at peace with ourselves and the world.

This peace was soon shattered, however, for ahead of us stretched a long, hot afternoon just like the morning, except that by now our blouses were soaked and our foreheads dripping. My tongue was making my whole throat taste the glue from several hundred dots, and my back ached from the constant jolting. The people fell into the same two classifications—the genuinely interested patrons of the bookmobile and the merely curious. Yet each one was an individual. Amid our real fans were Mrs. Taylor at Reid's Crossroads, who received a whole carton of the latest whodunits once a month, and Mrs. Jackson, who ran a combination gasoline-station-general-store along Route 40, and who always treated the three of us to a special super-colossal ice cream cone. It was from people like these that we learned to know our county—its past, and of course, its present. From one farmer's wife, we learned that George Washington's mother had once lived in her home, a stone mansion left since the earliest days of the country. George himself had covered that part of Maryland fully as well as he had done any other, and we were forever hearing of new overnight abodes of the great but evidently very sleepy general. Naturally, local gossip was a choice morsel to be reserved and repeated to us of the bookmobile with a knowing eye and a telling gesture. We were among the first to know of the weddings, births, deaths, and general good or bad fortune of the surrounding community; and we received all news with the proper relish. The curious, too, were present at nearly every stop. They usually stood and gazed from afar, gathering strength, and then, with sudden temerity, wandered up to the door. There they lost all brashness, and most of them blushed and stammered a confused "No'm, I'm just lookin'". Never saw one of these here things before". Sometimes we lured them in, talked to them to calm their extreme embarrassment, and reassured them that we were really human. Occasionally, they ended up as our best customers.

With these adults, or, more often, alone, came the children. They came literally in droves, each trying to outdo the other in his attempts to show off before these "big-city ladies". They ranged from the extremely polite little man with a newly scrubbed look and very pink ears who answered every question with a loud, confident "Yas'm!" to the dirty, scrubby little barefooted boys of South Mountain, who smoked cigarettes and tried out all their vocabulary of profanity on us the first day. (Since we paid absolutely no attention to them and didn't look in the least shocked, they were reasonably well-behaved the next month.) They represented every phase of upbringing from a bright and winsome curly-haired laddie in a shiny Hopalong Cassidy suit who whispered, "Do you have thome bookth about kittieth?" (high treason!) to a painfully shy little boy who dressed in knickers and always wore a hat. There were the boys of Taylor's Landing whose favorite pastime was jumping up and down on the back bump-

er, thus shaking the whole chassis and sending the stacked bags of books slithering across the floor. And there was the time that a cunning little boy came in the front door and disappeared into the crowd filling the back of the bookmobile. About five minutes later, in marched a little lad exactly like the first. "Aha," thought I, "twins"! Five minutes later, I decided it must be triplets and by the time I'd gotten to quintuplets, I began to be suspicious and finally discovered that our hero was having a delightful time inching out the back window, dropping to the ground, and running around and in the front door to repeat the process.

Since by about three or four o'clock in the afternoon, we were feeling genuinely dry, hot, and rather dead, we picked the cleanest of the near-by country stores, stopped, and bought cooling cokes. After this "pause that refreshes", we podded on, getting what might be termed our second wind, but still feeling so tired we were slightly hysterical. Through no deliberate fault of planning, most of the last stops were the busiest, so that we numbly went through the proper motions, temporarily lost consciousness, and then giggled all the way home for no sane reason whatsoever. Depending on the day, the time might be anywhere from four-thirty to seven. Usually it was around six as we eased into the narrow space behind the library, bone-tired, our hair uncombed, sans lipstick, dirty, hot, and looking in general more like ditch-diggers than self-respecting librarians. We dragged ourselves home via Miss Cooper's old car, realizing that tomorrow we should be doing this same thing all over again.

And yet, with this realization came a deep satisfaction, unlike any we had ever known. We had seen living conditions from prosperous farmlands to packing-box shacks in a narrow, dirty patch of cleared land, and we had met and talked with people from all walks of life. We had seen the desperate needs of our community, and we were doing our small part to relieve them. We were needed—that meant most of all—and if we sighed as we bumped home, it was not from sheer weariness, but from deep contentment.