

THE BOOKSELLER

El Librero

Alfonso

A man is flying somewhere and reading a book. This is his way of life. He is a bookseller, on his way to buy, on his way to sell. He travels in more than one space and in more than one time. In many dimensions. He travels alone, but knows people in far-off places. They always welcome him, for business and for his company. They want to know where he's been, they want to hear new stories, and they want, of course, to see the rare and beautiful books he carries.

Yet he is not a naturally talkative person. Always courteous, yes. And knowledgeable. But quiet, reserved, watchful, full of secrets, of things he won't say. It is fruitless to ask him where he has found a book. Provenance is important in scholarship, but he will never divulge a source. Of course like any human being he loosens up at dinner when food and wine stretch the hours of the night. Then he may tell you how in Haiti just before the riots . . .

Or, on another night, a story like this . . .

“He's at it again. Old fool. Come on, let's have some fun.”

The two page boys—they were still called that although they had been working in the library for years—walked over to the table where the man was standing up so he could wave to the proctor at the front of the reading room. His face was red, sweaty, and twitching. He wore metal-rimmed glasses which enlarged his eyes. He was going bald but still had a lot of curly hair on the sides. He was about sixty. As they approached they could hear him muttering.

“Señor Molina, is something wrong?”

“You are wrong. The books are wrong. The library. Something is very wrong.”

“And just what is that, Señor? Tell us.”

“You know perfectly well.”

A third boy arrived pushing a cart which had one book on it. He handed it to the man, and said the others couldn't be found.

He glanced at the cover. “The least important book! You are wasting my time. This happened yesterday and the day before and last week. I wait an hour, and this is all I get? Why can't you find my books? Where are they? Who has them?”

“Mis-shelved, Señor. We are finding more and more like that.”

“No you aren't 'finding' them. You're losing them. You are all imbeciles.”

“Now, now, Señor, no shouting in the library. Besides the books you ask for are unusual, quite old.”

“Why should that matter?”

“Perhaps they are worn out.”

“Imbeciles!”

By now everyone in the room was staring. The man threw up his arms, gathered his papers and pens, stuffed them in his briefcase, and headed toward the

exit. In leaving he did not address the proctor who sat at an elevated station, but merely glared at him. More than once he had complained to this stone about the incompetence of the staff and the disorder of the library.

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The ancestry of this library began when the Jesuits were expelled from Spanish territories in 1767. It was a surprise military operation ordered by King Carlos III which took place throughout the continent on the same morning. The priests were rounded up and forced marched to ships awaiting at the ports, sometimes hundreds of kilometers away. Those who survived were transported to the Vatican. What they left behind were churches, colleges, schools, libraries, workshops, and vast mission plantations—in general superbly cared for and run. The best schools in America were Jesuit schools, and the best libraries as well. Fortunately (if such a word can be used after a depredation) some of these confiscated book collections became the nucleus of new libraries. Which was the case for La Biblioteca Pública de Carmona, Ecuador, founded in 1863. Still one of the grand post-independence buildings of the city.

The morning was sunny and rapidly warming up, the sky bright blue, as a man in a tan suit passed through the portal, pausing to let his eyes adjust to the dimmer light of the domed atrium. It was cool and quite comfortable, though the air was still and smelled—what? of old books? Some might say 'musty' but he rejected the word. He liked books.

To his left was a reception desk, in front an imposing staircase, and to the right an exhibit of early printing. In between these, tall arched doorways led to reading rooms. He told the receptionist that he was an inspector of police named Guillermo Robles, and would like to see the person who was in charge of the collection. They phoned Doctor Andrés Vidal who was in his office on the floor above. A library guard was asked to take him there.