

Ready, Reference?

BY WYAT HELSABECK*

Once upon a patron's query, while I pondered weak and weary,
 Cursing Shankle, Dewey, Ulrich, Winchell, Mudge, and all their kind,
 Suddenly, the desk untended, four phones ringing, drawers up-ended,
 Half the town at once descended on that little world of mine.
 God! I thought — we'll earn our wages! Frantically I rang for pages;
 And at last in what seemed ages, what I thought I'd never find
 Turned up (God knows why!) in Shankle — where nobody but a crank'll
 Look for what that dame called Constance to some other source assigned.
 Back to grab one phone I speeded — dizzy, blind, but undefeated,
 With just what this lady needed, then with voice sweet, refined,
 Quoth the patron, "Never mind!"

This displeased me — I admit it. Picked a pencil up and bit it,
 Felt my temper rise, but hid it, smiled and waxed polite once more.
 Up there rushed a sweet old lady (bless her, every day of eighty!)
 "Young man," said she, "something's shady. Where's that book I had before?"
 "Who's the author? What's the title?" This I knew was suicidal!
 Still — such trivia being vital in this rat race, I implore!
 "Don't expect *me* to remember. I reserved it last September.
 Someone in here should remember! That's what librarians are for!
 Find it! If you get contrary — I'll hit you with this dictionary!"
 (Webster's third, the eighty pound one, was the one she headed for!)
 "James!" I yelled; but she'd just wandered somewhere over in three hundred,
 Then to fiction, where she plundered, seeking recipes, she swore.
 "Madam," said I, with conviction, "you won't find cookbooks in fiction."
 Me and my big mouth — that section held not one, but cookbooks four.
 Quoth the patron, "Look — there's more!"

Back I slunk, my ego busted — irked, exhausted, plumb disgusted.
 "That damn Melvil can't be trusted!" I was muttering as I flew.
 Barely had I sneaked by Thomas, when some foreign lad said, "Vamos!
 Please to show me Nostradamus." That had got in fiction, too!
 Slowly, then, my poise returning, still my lesson never learning,
 Up there rushed a lady burning, with a great big book in tow.
 "Why don't annuals come out weekly?" "Beg your pardon?" said I meekly.
 "Get me something recent — queekly! Some folks have to work, you know."

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Wish I had a job this easy; you don't get your hands all greasy.

That young man in specs — who is he? When does *he* work? You're too slow."

That made me antagonistic. "Lady, let's be realistic.

You're just one more damn statistic!" said I, crossing out a row.

Quoth she, "You know where to go!"

Next, a lady with a hat on, slammed a book at what I sat on.

"What librarian dared put that on shelves? I'd pitch it out the door-

It's plain nasty — just read through it!" "Thank you, ma'am, I'll hop right to it.

Haven't had time yet to do it." (Better order several more!)

Naturally the book she needed had been lost or superseded —

So a loan form I completed, asking questions by the score.

"Now — just tell us why you need it." "Such fool questions! Think I'll eat it?

All I want to do is read it!" said she, stomping on the floor.

"How come Greek books in eight-eighty?" "That's where Dewey put 'em lady."

"Well — that man's a kook, already. Move 'em closer to the door!"

Quoth I, "Where's my two-by-four?"

What's a googol? Who shot Hector? Where's the nearest lie detector?

Who was Lincoln's cousin's sister's husband's nephew's only son?

Is that tree out there a ginkgo? I don't know, sir. I don't think so.

What makes all libraries stink so? You're a strange one — where your bun?

Is a platypus a plant, sir? Spell hors d'oeuvre — I bet you can't, sir.

Don't you *ever* know the answer? How'd you get a job in here?

We're mixed up, young man; unsnare us. Who stabbed Hamlet in the arras?

Watch your language, madam — spare us! What you're asking's not quite clear.

"Sir, this paper's due on Friday," quoth a teen-age Aphrodite.

"Tell me what it's on." "All rightey — here's some notes I tried to take.

Oedipus in Oklahoma! Sir, my boy friend's in a coma.

They won't give him his diploma till it's read, for heaven's sake!"

Quoth my colleague, "Take a break."

Off I went, my poor nerves twitchin' — had a cola in the kitchen,

Then back down to put my hitch in (two more hours, and home I go!)

"There's my teacher, that old geezer!" said a beatnik, reading a Caesar.

"Guess I'll dig this stuff, to please 'er—least, it's not that square Thoreau!"

"Hey, you! This ain't illustrated. It's too long, too complicated!

Who reads stuff ain't even rated in the best-seller list?"

"Well — there's other things worth reading." "Yeah — like what?" (Our minds aren't meeting!)

This kid needs a good stiff beating — not a psychotherapist!

Night and day — there's no end to it. I can't figure why we do it

Just ourselves to blame — we knew it, when we crammed for that degree.

Quoth the patron, "C'est la vie!"