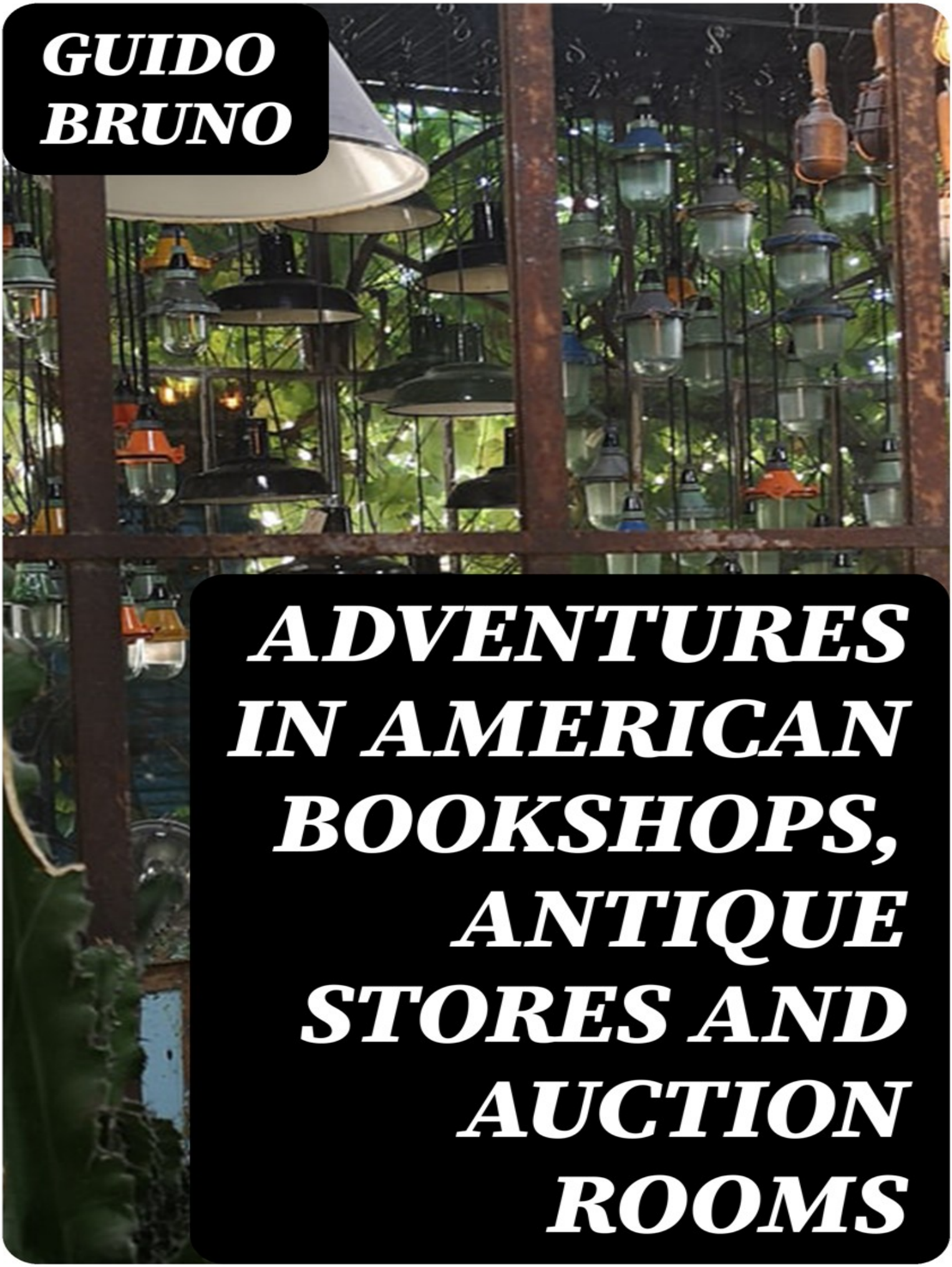
GUIDO BRUNO



ADVENTURES IN AMERICAN BOOKSHOPS, ANTIQUE STORES AND AUCTION ROOMS

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EAN 8596547305743

DigiCat, 2022
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Preface

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THESE sketches appeared originally in Pearson's Magazine, Bruno's Weekly and the Book Hunter, and I make grateful acknowledgment for permission to reprint.

On reading the proofs, I feel I have not done justice to my bookselling friends. I wandered into their shops, I browsed among their books, I listened to their talk and wrote it down ... pictures not studies, impressions not descriptions. Some of my friends have since passed on to a better world and in these pages will be found perhaps the only record of their useful and laborious lives. This, I believe, is one excuse for the existence of my little book.

In the April issue, 1917, of Pearson's appeared an article of mine telling about that wonderstore of Brentano's in New York about the late Deutschberger and about other old-time booksellers of Fourth Avenue and Union Square. I was unable to procure a copy of this magazine and therefore had to omit this important story in this compilation.

While in Detroit recently I met the charming Mr. Higgins, dean of Michigan's booksellers, and he objected to my statement in one of my articles: "Detroit has not one second-hand Book Shop." I gladly take it back. Mr. Higgins has a whole houseful of gems and 27 packing boxes filled with rare first editions and scarce Americana. His three shops would make our metropolitan friends justly envious. When I wrote years ago about Detroit's bookshops I had not met Walter MacKee, who holds open house in Sheehan's and is not only a good bookman but also a talented comedian. I

had not signed my name in Mr. La Belle's guestbook in MacCaully Brothers' store where authors passing Detroit are made welcome. I had not visited Mr. Dennen's Book Shop, where jeweled prayer books, rare Shakespeare editions, can be had as well as the newest novels and books on golf. I had not then visited Mr. Proctor's Clarion Shop in Orchestra Hall, the gayest little place, thanks to Mr. Knopf's love of vivid colors. Mrs. Morris, in the Hudson Department Store, created a delightful nook for her book department. Finally, Mr. Gordon came to Detroit as standard-bearer of the Powner's Book Interests, who acquired recently the Reyerson Book Shop. Allister Crowley's beautiful Equinox had something to do with the bankruptcy of this old firm, I am told. Mrs. Gordon, who was Miss Powner before her marriage, is taking an active interest and perpetuating the traditions of a family of booklovers.

And there is Mr. Shaffat's book store on Hastings Street, with its framed letter by the late Roosevelt who purchased here an important book on Africa during the last months of his presidency.

Now I have made amends for my hasty statement. I hope Mr. Higgins will read these lines and accept my humble apologies.

GUIDO BRUNO.

November, 1922.

The Romance of Buying and Selling Old Things

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OLD things of all description may lose their value and desirability to their temporary owners, but never to the world. Nothing disappears completely. The smallest piece of tissue paper that has served as a wrapper for an orange and is swept along the sidewalk by a stray wind will ultimately be gathered by some one and again put to some use.

Objects which find their way through the back door of a Fifth Avenue mansion into a rubbish wagon and are carried away will re-appear in some flat of a tenement house as a new and welcome addition to somebody's comfort.

Articles discarded in tenement house dwellings and sold for a few pennies to a ragman are triumphantly brought into the reception room of a patrician mansion, treasured by the new owners, and admired by his friends.

Curious and extraordinary are the fortunes of old objects on their way to a new proprietor with whom they will stay for a while, and their wanderings are eternal.

Old things in New York are sold in magnificent establishments on Fifth Avenue, and they are sold in dungeons on the Bowery. Some people are so poor that they have to buy "second-hand things" to furnish their homes and clothe their bodies. Others are so rich that they are compelled to buy antiques in order to possess something unique.

But the men who deal in old things, whose chosen calling it is to buy and to sell antiques and second-hand wares are the true adventurers among the business men of New York. No matter whether their finger nails and manners are polished and they entertain prospective buyers in luxurious display rooms, or, whether they walk in tenement house

districts from door to door, ready to buy anything and everything, or whether they wait for customers in their stuffy shops on Park Row or Baxter Street; they all possess the hope that some day they will make *the* find, and buy for a song something they will be able to sell for a large amount. Not money but the game of hunting after the unexpected, and the thrill in finding it, constitute the lure that attracts the seeker after old things.

The Poor Man’s Hunting Ground

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There are many people on the streets of New York taken for granted without further question. Have you ever seen early in the morning when people sit around the breakfast table, a cleanly dressed man, with wrapping paper and cord under his arms, walking in the roadway, looking up at the windows of private houses and ejaculating every five or ten paces some inarticulate noises?

If you lean out of the window and watch him you will see him disappear into some of the houses, and if you wait for his reappearance you will notice that his wrapping paper has now become a bundle.

“Cash-Clothes! Cash-Clothes!” Untiringly he cries out these two words at the people who dwell in the houses he passes. Servants frequently answer the call of “cash-clothes” and let the man in through the back door as a welcome buyer of discarded wearing apparel of their masters and mistresses.

What does he do with his purchases?

Once I beckoned to a kindly-looking old man whose wrapping paper was still neatly folded under his arm, to come up to my room. How he ever found my dwelling place among all the other doors of the studio building, is a riddle to me. I answered his knock. He remained quietly standing at the door, his hat in his hand:

“What have you got to sell?” he asked very business-like, taking in the appearance of the room with one glance.

“I have nothing for sale,” I told him. “But I would like to know more about your business. I wish you would tell me what sort of things you buy and what you do with them after you have purchased them?”

“Of course, I am willing to pay you for your time if you will be kind enough to name your price, for say, half-an-hour.”

He hesitated a bit, looked around scrutinizingly, and something evidently convinced him that I was “all right.” I invited him to take a seat. He said half an hour of his time would be worth fifty cents, I gained more of his confidence by paying the fifty cents in advance and after some more questioning he told me his story and the story of about two thousand other men who are following the same calling in New York.

“I start out every morning at seven o’clock. I take with me all the cash I have in this world, heavy wrapping paper and cord, and then I walk the streets. Just as I attracted you I draw the attention of persons who really mean business. They sell for various reasons; some sell clothes or shoes or bedding or underwear because they need money very badly; pawnshops don’t lend them anything on their over-

worn clothes, and I am about the only purchaser they can find. Other people want to get things out of the way. They are moving and their trunks cannot hold all the stuff they have accumulated. I buy everything that I can carry.

“No, I have no place of business. I have to turn my money over at once or I should be out of work tomorrow. I walk about picking up stuff until eleven o’clock and then go to Baxter Street and sell.

“In the afternoon I go into another part of the city and again buy up as much as I can get and in the evening between five and six, back to Baxter Street.”

“What is on Baxter Street?” I interjected.

“That’s where all the dealers are. I sell to dealers only and they have fixed prices. For instance, we get from seventy-five cents to one dollar for a pair of trousers without patches, twenty-five cents to fifty cents for patched-up trousers, according to the extent of the necessary repairs. Waistcoats bring fifty cents, coats from twenty-five cents up to a dollar. Shoes according to their condition, anything from five cents to seventy-five cents. Hats, neckties, shirts, collars; socks bring a few pennies only, according to their attractiveness. Overcoats are in great demand in the cold season. They bring from one dollar up to five dollars. Women’s dresses bring about the same prices. I usually make from twenty-five to fifty cents profit on the dollar. Often I make a hundred per cent and often, too, I make a mistake and lose money. Once in a while I pick up a piece of jewelry, but people don’t sell jewelry outright. They would rather pawn it, and then sell the pawn ticket.

“I’ve bought pawn tickets. I paid ten per cent of the loaned amount, but I got stung so often by buying fake tickets that I don’t bother with them any more. I know people who go about as I do who make ten and fifteen dollars the day, but I call it a fair day if I clear from three to five dollars. Ten dollars is about a fair capital to start with in buying and selling old clothes, but I know a man who started with fifty cents and in less than a year he owned a shop on Baxter Street.

“Once I had a great day. A man called me in. It was on Forty-fifth Street, and I think he must have been an actor. He asked me to take away all the clothes contained in a big trunk in his room. They were all women’s clothes of expensive fabric. I had to come three times before I had taken it all away.

“‘How much will you give me for it?’ he inquired. All I had in my pocket was twelve dollars. I made him an offer of ten dollars, and I was never more ashamed of myself than in that moment. But he didn’t pay any attention to me. He smoked a cigarette and simply said: ‘That will be all right, but take it out immediately.’ I made bundles and carried it out in portions. I gave him ten dollars. I laid the money on the table, and before I left the room the last time, I said: ‘Mister, here are the ten dollars,’ pointing to the money that was still laying on the table. ‘Take it along, too,’ was his answer. ‘It would bring me only bad luck. Take it quickly and get out with you.’

“I got frightened and took the money and went downstairs to the landlady of the rooming house and asked

her whether he was ‘all right,’ whether it was safe to buy the things from him.

“The landlady answered: ‘Oh, yes, he’s all right, the poor fellow. His wife ran away with some other man only yesterday, and he seems to take it very hard.’

“Another time I found a five-dollar gold piece in a waistcoat that I bought from a Jap in a big house on Madison Avenue. I went back with it, and told him that he had forgotten the five dollars which I found in the garment. He gave me two dollars and a half and told me that I was a damned fool. I am sure the waistcoat and the money had belonged to his master.

“If one wants to take chances, big money can be made in buying old clothes. I have an uncle—he is dead now—peace be with his soul!—who made thousands of dollars. But he was constantly mixed up with the police and had to pay graft on all hands, and lived in perpetual fear that something unfortunate would happen to him. I wouldn’t touch such business.

“He went to the Tenderloin and to the bad houses: he knew girls who were living a fast life. He would buy their clothes and their jewelry for next to nothing if they needed money to pay fines in the Night Court, or if they were driven out by the police and had to leave for another dwelling. He would sell those things, perhaps on the same day for a hundred times as much money to other girls who were flush. But the money brought no blessing to him. His son is blind and he himself died of cancer in the hospital, and he was in awful pain to the last moment.”

Again I interrupted my visitor, who seemed very generous with his time, and asked him:

“But what happens to the things on Baxter Street after you have sold them to the stores?”

“They go to the four winds,” he said, pointing characteristically with his upturned thumb. “People buy them and wear them again; dealers from uptown buy the better things and put them in their shops; there are never enough goods on the market. But why don’t you go down to Baxter Street and see for yourself?”

The Open Air Exchange on Baxter Street

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Baxter Street is situated in the oldest part of New York. Fifty to seventy-five years ago the houses were private homes occupied by respectable and well-to-do citizens, by merchants after whom streets and places are named today. The street is lined with shops. Clothes are displayed along the house fronts; shoes in long rows lie along the show windows; while boxes with neckties in profusion invite the lover of colors to make a selection. Business is carried on in the street. The stores are dark and seem to serve merely as workshops and store rooms. About noon I strolled down the street and took in the sights which are as confusing as the turmoil in Broad Street during the busiest hours of the Curb Market. Men with bundles on their backs and with pushcarts were constantly arriving. They offered the contents of their packages for sale. Others stood about looking at the various wares and making offers. Dickering was going on in all

quarters. Things changed hands rapidly. There was one dark overcoat with a Persian lamb collar which had originally been brought in by a “Cash-clothes” man. The coat was sold to the proprietor of one of these stores and resold at once to a man who had watched the original bargaining. The same coat was thrown upon a pushcart with several other overcoats and sold “wholesale” to a third man who evidently took his purchases out of the district. In a basement I noticed an unusually tall and dignified looking man wearing a sombrero who didn’t seem to pay much attention to the buying and selling of his clerks, or were they his sons? He really looked like a Western Colonel, and I christened him at once “Colonel Baxter.” He was very friendly and accessible. He answered my many inquiries: “You see these men with the bundles and pushcarts? They have bought the stuff all over the city, and now they are disposing of it at the best prices they can get.”

“I know,” I cried, “how they get it. But please tell me what you do with it after you have bought it.”

“Come inside with me and I’ll show you,” was his answer. We descended to his basement. Piles of clothes and shoes lay on the floor, they must have been recently purchased. He opened the door and we entered a veritable workshop. Several gas arms illuminated the room which had a low ceiling. The air was thick and at least ten men and women were at work.

“Here is our laundry,” and he pointed to one corner of the room.

“All underclothes, shirts and collars, overalls and linen suits are washed and ironed here. We sell only by the dozen