

TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN BEST SELLERS



MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

# A POOR WISE MAN

## 贫穷的聪明人

[美] 玛丽·罗伯茨·莱因哈特 著

世界图书出版公司

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# 序

从 1895 年美国《书商》杂志开启“按销量排序的图书目录”，美国的“畅销书”至今已有百年发展史，其间荣登年度榜的图书达上千册。阅读这些畅销书，可以学习各时代美国最畅销图书中的语言，了解当时的阅读旨趣，领略当时的社会习俗和风土人情，何乐而不为？

不过，阅读畅销书也需精选。畅销书只是显现读者的阅读旨趣，并不区分它的高下，读者真实的阅读旨趣是雅俗共存的；登上畅销书排行榜的并不总经得起时间的冲刷，许多名噪一时的畅销书早已销声匿迹，尘封在历史的沟壑中。

然而畅销书中自然也有大量经典得以长久流传。我们今天重读美国百年畅销图书，有着以往不曾有的优势。一是，时间的冲刷保证了今日重读之畅销书的经典。能留存至今的多是能够让人细细品读出些许感悟的，而不仅是出于猎奇心理、名人效应。二是，时空的距离感让我们能更好地反思畅销书中所折射出的社会现象。多了一分思考的冷峻，少了一分身处当局的迷惑，我们能以一个旁观者的角色更加清醒地审视。

鉴于以上宗旨，本系列所选的畅销书都历经淘洗，至今光彩斐然，甚具代表性。成功类的书籍诸如《白手起家的商人给儿子的信》、《罗斯福总统给子女的信》和《如何度过一天的 24 小时》；文学类的书籍众多，包括赫赫有名的《马克·吐温自传》，开创了美国西部牛仔小说先河的《弗吉尼亚人》，反映纽约上层社会生活的《纯真年代》，表现女性自我探索的《满溢之杯》，讲述一战之后生死与重建的《贫穷的聪明人》，扣人心弦、探求正义的《公平与不公平》，文字优美、充满真挚情感的爱情小说《百分之一的机会》和表现纽约曼哈顿贫民区生活的《明确的目标：纽约爱情故事》等；此外还有文化类书籍——世界史研究界几乎无人不知的 H. G. 威尔斯的《历史的概要（世界史纲）》。每本读来都会有不一样的收获，可以满足读者对不同类型书籍的偏好。

阅读美国百年畅销图书，浸润美国最地道的语言，了解美国原汁原味的文化。

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## CHAPTER 1 FIGHTING SHRIMPLIN

Custer felt it his greatest privilege to sit of a Sunday morning in his mother's clean and burnished kitchen and, while she washed the breakfast dishes, listen to such reflections as his father might care to indulge in.

On these occasions the senior Shrimplin, commonly called Shrimp by his intimates, was the very picture of unconventional ease-taking as he lolled in his chair before the kitchen stove, a cracker box half filled with sawdust conveniently at hand.

As far back as his memory went Custer could recall vividly these Sunday mornings, with the church bells ringing peacefully beyond the windows of his modest home, and his father in easy undress, just emerged from his weekly bath and pleasantly redolent of strong yellow soap, his feet incased in blue yarn socks – white at toe and heel – and the neckband of his fresh-starched shirt sawing away at the lobes of his freckled ears. On these occasions Mr. Shrimplin inclined to a certain sad conservatism as he discussed with his son those events of the week last passed which had left their impress on his mind. But what pleased Custer best was when his father, ceasing to be gently discursive and becoming vigorously personal, added yet another canto to the stirring epic of William Shrimplin.

Custer was wholly and delightfully sympathetic. There was, he felt, the very choicest inspiration in the narrative, always growing and expanding, of his father's earlier career, before Mrs. Shrimplin came into his life, and as Mr. Shrimplin delicately intimated, tied him hand

and foot. The same grounds of mutual understanding and intellectual dependence which existed between Custer and his father were lacking where Mrs. Shrimplin was concerned. She was unromantic, with a painfully literal cast of mind, though Custer – without knowing what is meant by a sense of humor, suspected her of this rare gift, a dangerous and destructive thing in woman. Privately considering her relation to his father, he was forced to the conclusion that their union was a most distressing instance of the proneness of really great minds to leave their deep channels and seek the shallow waters in the every-day concerns of life. He felt vaguely that she was narrow and provincial; for had she not always lived on the flats, a region bounded by the Square on the north and by Stoke's furniture factory on the south? On the west the flats extended as far as civilization itself extended in that direction, that is, to the gas house and the creek bank, while on the east they were roughly defined by Mitchell's tannery and the brick slaughter-house, beyond which vacant lots merged into cow pastures, the cow pastures yielding in their turn to the real country, where the level valley rolled up into hills which tilted the great green fields to the sun.

Mrs. Shrimplin had been born on the flats, and the flats had witnessed her meeting and mating with Shrimplin, when that gentleman had first appeared in Mount Hope in the interest of Whiting's celebrated tooth-powder, to the use of which he was not personally committed. At that time he was also an itinerant bill-poster and had his lodgings at Maxy Schaffer's Railroad Hotel hard by the B. & O. tracks.

Mr. Shrimplin was five feet three, and narrow chested. A drooping flaxen mustache shaded a sloping chin and a loose under lip, while a pair of pale eyes looked sadly out upon the world from the shadow of a hooked nose.



Mr. Joe Montgomery, Mrs. Shrimplin's brother-in-law, present on the occasion of her marriage to the little bill-poster, had critically surveyed the bridegroom and had been moved to say to a friend, "Shrimp certainly do favor a peanut!"

Mr. Montgomery's comparative criticism of her husband's appearance had in due season reached the ears of the bride, and had caused a rupture in the family that the years had not healed, but her resentment had been more a matter of justice to herself than that she felt the criticism to be wholly inapt.

Mr. Shrimplin had now become a public servant, for certain gasolene lamps in the town of Mount Hope were his proud and particular care. Any night he could be seen seated in his high two-wheeled cart drawn by a horse large in promise of speed but small in achievement, a hissing gasolene torch held between his knees, making his way through that part of the town where gas-lamps were as yet unknown. He still further added to his income by bill-posting and paper-hanging, for he belonged to the rank and file of life, with a place in the procession well toward the tail.

But Custer had no suspicion of this. He never saw his father as the world saw him. He would have described his eye as piercing; he would have said, in spite of the slouching uncertainty that characterized all his movements, that he was as quick as a cat; and it was only Custer who detected the note of authority in the meek tones of his father's voice.

And Custer was as like the senior Shrimplin as it was possible for fourteen to be like forty-eight. His mother said, "He certainly looks for all the world like his pa!" but her manner of saying it left doubt as to whether she rejoiced in the fact; for, while Mr. Shrimplin was undoubtedly a hero to Custer, he was not and never had been and never

could be a hero to Mrs. Shrimplin. She saw in him only what the world saw – a stoop-shouldered little man who spent six days of the seven in overalls that were either greasy or pasty.

It was a vagary of Mr. Shrimplin's that ten reckless years of his life had been spent in the West, the far West, the West of cow-towns and bad men; that for this decade he had flourished on bucking broncos and in gilded bars, the admired hero of a variety of deft homicides. Out of his inner consciousness he had evolved a sprightly epic of which he was the central figure, a figure, according to Custer's firm belief, sinister, fateful with big jingling silver spurs at his heels and iron on his hips, whose specialty was manslaughter.

In the creation of his romance he might almost be said to have acquired a literary habit of mind, to which he was measurably helped by the fiction he read.

Custer devoured the same books; but he never suspected his father of the crime of plagiarism, nor guessed that his choicest morsels of adventure involved a felony. Mrs. Shrimplin felt it necessary to protest:

"No telling with what nonsense you are filling that boy's head!"

"I hope," said Mr. Shrimplin, narrowing his eyes to a slit, as if he expected to see pictured on the back of their lids the panorama of Custer's future, "I hope I am filling his head with just nonsense enough so he will never crawfish, no matter what kind of a proposition he goes up against!"

Custer colored almost guiltily. Could he ever hope to attain to the grim standard his father had set for him?

"I wasn't much older than him when I shot Murphy at Fort Worth," continued Mr. Shrimplin, "You've heard me tell about him, son – old one-eye Murphy of Texacana?"

"He died, I suppose!" said Mrs. Shrimplin, wringing out her dish-rag. "Dear knows! I wonder you ain't been hung long ago!"

"Did he die!" rejoined Mr. Shrimplin ironically. "Well, they usually die when I begin to throw lead!" He tugged fiercely at the ends of his drooping flaxen mustache and gazed into the wide and candid eyes of his son.

"Like I should give you the particulars, Custer?" he inquired.

Custer nodded eagerly, and Mr. Shrimplin cleared his throat.

"He was called one-eye Murphy because he had only one eye – he'd lost the other in a rough-and-tumble fight; it had been gouged out by a feller's thumb. Murphy got the feller's ear, chewed it off as they was rolling over and over on the floor, so you might say they swapped even."

"I wonder you'd pick on an afflicted person like that," observed Mrs. Shrimplin.

"Afflicted! Well, he could see more and see further with that one eye than most men could with four!"

"I should think four eyes would be confusin'," said Mrs. Shrimplin.

Mr. Shrimplin folded his arms across his narrow chest and permitted his glance to follow Mrs. Shrimplin's ample figure as she moved to and fro about the room; and when he spoke again a gentle melancholy had crept into his tone.

"I dunno but a man makes a heap of sacrifices he never gets no credit for when he marries and settles down. The ladies ain't what they used to be. They look on a man now pretty much as a meal-ticket. I guess if a feller chewed off another feller's ear in Mount Hope he'd never hear the last of it!"

As neither Mrs. Shrimplin nor Custer questioned this point, Mr.

Shrimplin reverted to his narrative.

"I started in to tell you how I put Murphy out of business, didn't I, son? The facts brought out by the coroner's jury," embarking on what he conceived to be a bit of happy and elaborate realism, "was that I'd shot him in self-defense after he'd drawn a gun on me. He had heard I was at Fort Worth – not that I was looking for trouble, which I never done; but I never turned it down when any one was at pains to fetch it to me; I was always willing they should leave it with me for to have a merry time. Murphy heard I'd said if he'd come to Fort Worth I'd take him home and make a pet of him; and he'd sent back word that he was looking for a man with two ears to play with; and I'd said mine was on loose and for him to come and pull 'em off. After that there was just one thing he could do if he wanted to be well thought of, and he done it. He hit the town hell-snorting, and so mad he was fit to be tied." Mr. Shrimplin paused to permit this striking phrase to lay hold of Custer's imagination. "Yes, sir, hell-snorting, and so bad he was plum scairt of himself. He said he was looking for a gentleman who had sent him word he had two ears to contribute to the evening's gaiety, by which I knowed he meant me and was in earnest. He was full of boot-leg whisky –"

"What kind of whisky's that, pa?" asked Custer.

"That," said Mr. Shrimplin, looking into the round innocent face of his son, "that's the stuff the traders used to sell the Indians. Strong? Well, you might say it was middling strong – just middling – about three drops of it would make a rabbit spit in a bulldog's face!"

It was on one memorable twenty-seventh of November that Mr. Shrimplin reached this height of verbal felicity, and being Thanksgiving day, it was, aside from the smell of strong yellow soap and the fresh-starched white shirt, very like a Sunday.

He and Custer sat before the kitchen stove and in the intervals of his narrative listened to the wind rise without, and watched the sparse flakes of fine snow that it brought coldly out of the north, where the cloud banks lay leaden and chill on the far horizon.

Mr. Shrimplin had risen early that day, or, as he told Custer, he had "got up soon", and long before his son had left his warm bed in the small room over the kitchen, was well on his rounds in his high two-wheeled cart, with the rack under the seat which held the great cans of gasolene from which the lamps were filled. He had only paused at Maxy Schaffer's Railroad Hotel to partake of what he called a Kentucky breakfast – a drink of whisky and a chew of tobacco – a simple dietary protection against the evils of an empty stomach, to which he particularly drew Custer's attention.

His father's occupation was entirely satisfactory to Custer. Being employed by the town gave him an official standing, perhaps not so distinguished as that of a policeman, but still eminently worth while; and Mr. Shrimplin added not a little to the sense of its importance by dilating on the intrigues of ambitious rivals who desired to wrest his contract from him; and he impressed Custer, who frequently accompanied him on his rounds, with the wisdom of keeping the lamps that shown upon the homes of members of the town council in especially good order. Furthermore, there were possibilities of adventure in the occupation; it took Mr. Shrimplin into out-of-the-way streets and unfrequented alleys, and, as Custer knew, he always went armed. Sometimes, when in an unusually gracious mood, his father permitted him to verify this fact by feeling his bulging hip pocket. The feel of it was vastly pleasing to Custer, particularly when Mr. Shrimplin had to tell of strangers engaged in mysterious conversation on dark street

corners, who slunk away as he approached. More than this, it was a matter of public knowledge that he had had numerous controversies in low portions of the town touching the right of the private citizen to throw stones at the street lamps; to Custer he made dire threats. He'd "toss a scare into them red necks yet! They'd bust his lamps once too often – he was laying for them! He knowed pretty well who done it, and when he found out for sure –" He winked at Custer, leaving it to his son's imagination to determine just what form his vengeance would take, and Custer, being nothing if not sanguinary, prayed for bloodshed.

But the thing that pleased the boy best was his father's account of those meetings with mysterious strangers. How as he approached they moved off with many a furtive backward glance; how he made as if to drive away in the opposite direction, and then at the first corner turned swiftly about and raced down some parallel street in hot pursuit, to come on them again, to their great and manifest discomfiture. Circumstantially he described each turn he made, down what streets he drove Bill at a gallop, up which he walked that trustworthy animal; all was elaborately worked out. The chase, however, always ended one way – the strangers disappeared unaccountably, and, search as he might, he could not find them again, but he and Custer felt certain that his activity had probably averted some criminal act.

In short, to Mr. Shrimplin and his son the small events of life magnified themselves, becoming distorted and portentous. A man, emerging suddenly from an alley in the dusk of the early evening, furnished them with a theme for infinite speculation and varied conjecture; that nine times out of ten the man said, "Hello, Shrimp!" and passed on his way perfectly well known to the little lamplighter was a matter of not the slightest importance. Sometimes, it is true, Mr.

Shrimplin told of the salutation, but the man was always a stranger to him, and that he should have spoken, calling him by name, he and Custer agreed only added to the sinister mystery of the encounter.

It was midday on that twenty-seventh of November when Mr. Shrimplin killed Murphy of the solitary eye, and he reached the climax of the story just as Mrs. Shrimplin began to prepare the dressing for the small turkey that was to be the principal feature of their four-o'clock dinner. The morning's scanty fall of snow had been so added to as time passed that now it completely whitened the strip of brown turf in the little side yard beyond the kitchen windows.

"I think," said Mr. Shrimplin, "we are going to see some weather. Well, snow ain't a bad thing." His dreamy eyes rested on Custer for an instant; they seemed to invite a question.

"No?" said Custer interrogatively.

"If I was going to murder a man, I don't reckon I'd care to do it when there was snow on the ground."

Mrs. Shrimplin here suggested cynically that perhaps he dreaded cold feet, but her husband ignored this. To what he felt to be the commonplaceness of her outlook he had long since accustomed himself. He merely said:

"I suppose more criminals has been caught because they done their crimes when it was snowing than any other way. Only chance a feller would have to get off without leaving tracks would be in a balloon; I don't know as I ever heard of a murderer escaping in a balloon, but I reckon it could be done."

He disliked to relinquish such an original idea, and the subject of murderers and balloons, with such ramifications as suggested themselves to his mind, occupied him until dinner-time. He quitted the

table to prepare for his night's work, and at five o'clock backed wild Bill into the shafts of his high cart, lighted the hissing gasolene torch, and mounted to his seat.

"I expect he'll want his head to-night; he's got a game look," he said to Custer, nodding toward Bill. Then, as he tucked a horse blanket snugly about his legs, he added: "It's a caution the way he gets over the ground. I never seen a horse that gets over the ground like Bill does."

Which was probably true enough, for Bill employed every known gait.

"He's a mighty well-broke horse!" agreed Custer in a tone of sincere conviction.

"He is. He's got more gaits than you can shake a stick at!" said Mr. Shrimplin.

Privately he labored under the delusion that Bill was dangerous; even years of singular rectitude on Bill's part had failed to alter his original opinion on this one point, and he often told Custer that he would have felt lost with a horse just anybody could have driven, for while Bill might not and probably would not have suited most people, he suited him all right.

"Well, good-by, son," said Mr. Shrimplin, slapping Bill with the lines.

Bill went out of the alley back of Mr. Shrimplin's small barn, his head held high, and taking tremendous strides that somehow failed in their purpose if speed was the result desired.

Twilight deepened; the snow fell softly, silently, until it became a ghostly mist that hid the town – hid the very houses on opposite sides of the street, and through this flurry Bill shuffled with unerring instinct, dragging Mr. Shrimplin from lamp-post to lamp-post, until presently down the street a long row of lights blazed red in the swirling smother



of white.

Custer reentered the house. The day held the sentiment of Sunday and this he found depressing. He had also dined ambitiously, and this he found even more depressing. He wondered vaguely, but with no large measure of hope, if there would be sledding in the morning. Probably it would turn warm during the night; he knew how those things went. From his seat by the stove he watched the hurrying flakes beyond the windows, and as he watched, the darkness came down imperceptibly until he ceased to see beyond the four walls of the room.

Mrs. Shrimplin was busy with her mending. She did not attempt conversation with her son, though she occasionally cast a curious glance in his direction; he was not usually so silent. All at once the boy started.

"What's that?" he cried.

"La, Custer, how you startle a body! It's the town bell. I should think you'd know; you've heard it often enough." As she spoke she glanced at the clock on the shelf in the corner of the room. "I guess that clock's stopped again," she added, but in the silence that followed her words they both heard it tick.

The bell rang on.

"It ain't half past seven yet. Maybe it's a fire!" said Custer. He quitted his chair and moved to the window. "I wish they'd give the ward. They'd ought to. How's a body to know —"

"Set down, Custer!" commanded his mother sharply. "You ain't going out! You know your pa don't allow you to go to no fires after night."

"You don't call this night!" He was edging toward the door.

"Yes, I do!"

"A quarter after seven ain't night!" he expostulated.