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The Shopkeeper: a Short Story

by Craig Brown

Once upon a time there lived a man at the foot of the mountains. Both the man and mountains were wondrously made. The man was taught early in life to prepare for adulthood by learning a skilled trade. It was necessary in order to survive in his hard-working foothills town.

Often looking upward into the mountains, the man thought he would become a shopkeeper. He would sell mountain equipment and supplies: backpacks, tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear, maps and compasses. He thought that would be a fine and honorable role to fulfill. He would help prepare people to know about the mountains which had always captivated his mind and heart.

The man became a most competent shopkeeper. You could certainly call him successful. He arranged his store in such a way as to simulate being in the mountains. There was an artificial stream flowing through an artificial meadow. An artificial campsite displayed an artificial campfire with artificial camp food. Mountain climbers could even practice scaling an artificial cliff made of artificial rock. Mountainous numbers of people flocked to the store, for they were hungry to learn more of the mountains. Lectures and seminars soon became quite popular at the store. The shopkeeper had to add on parking and classroom space for these weekly events. Additional staff was needed to handle the paperwork, to help baby-sit the children of the customers and to keep the inventory updated.

The shopkeeper was very busy conducting learning sessions. Of particular interest was the skill of “orienting” . . . of reading maps and using a compass. Maps and compasses of all types became some of the hottest selling items. There were multi-colored maps which showed where the meadows, canyons, valleys and lakes were to be found should someone be out in the mountains. Dangers within the mountain range were also well-marked: abandoned mine shafts, uncrossable rivers, treacherous cliffs and impassable swamplands. Along with the maps came written descriptions of what life in the mountains was actually like: sleeping under starry skies, the smell of breakfast bacon, pine-scented breezes, flower-filled mountain meadows, bull elk bugling, wind-whistled forests and purpled 14,000 foot peaks.

Compasses came in all sizes, shapes and prices. Elaborate engravings were available. They were a favorite gift item. Families enjoyed having several on display in their homes. The shopkeeper was quite an expert on the various manufacturers of compasses. He knew their history and the stories behind their craftsmanship. He had even traveled to the map and compass factories in the east where they were produced. He had talked with the cartographers and the compass-craftsmen, and attended their lectures and seminars. Factory-direct framed certificates hung in the shopkeeper’s office, verifying his expertise in the field of maps and compasses.

Business continued at a pleasing and prosperous rate. The numbers were up. The shopkeeper was proudly busy and well-respected within his community. The shopkeeper was not one to merely sit on his previous successes however. He was a man of continual learning. New maps and compasses were always arriving at the store. The technological advances were staggering. Maps and compasses could now tell a mountain-student details of mountain vegetation, altitude readings and degree of slope on every trail, species of animal and plant life within a certain geographical area, and the current atmospheric conditions. The shopkeeper was busy keeping up with such advances, as well as with passing on such new knowledge to his customers. It was, he believed, his obligation to so serve his customers.

In spite of the hectic pace, all was well in the mountain store until one day a new customer asked to see the owner. The customer asked if excursions into the high country were available. Did the shopkeeper ever take a group of hikers outside the store for trips of any type? Were there day-trips for picnics and nature-watching? Were there overnight weekend hikes? Could hunting and/or fishing parties be organized for several days at a time? The shopkeeper quickly explained that none of those services were available. Everyone in the store was quite occupied with providing maps and compasses, not with being a guide. Successful map-sellers, in order to deal in high volume, can not waste time traipsing into the hills. Who would mind the store? Who would be there to answer the technical questions regarding the maps and compasses? Who would conduct the lectures and show the films for the townspeople and the tourists?

The shopkeeper did recall to the inquisitive customer that several years prior there had been some townspeople who had ventured off on their own into the mountains. They had purchased a moderate amount of equipment, supplies, a basic set of dependable maps and an accurate, although not elaborate, compass. They had even attended a lecture, learning proper operation of their mountain gear. They were thankful for the store being there to provide them with much needed equipment, supplies and guidance. Then they set off into the mountains. With a slight grin, the shopkeeper told of a small band which had returned that very evening. The dirt and heat and discom-

fort of backpacking had convinced them to return to the comfort of their homes. They would enjoy instead the shopkeeper's lectures and simulated woodlands. Another group from the original band had stayed a few nights in the mountains, but after a torrential thunder and lightning storm threw their camp into disarray, they feared for their lives and, in a panic, evacuated themselves back to town.

And then it was with a sense of wanderlust in the shopkeeper's eyes, a look which recalled youthful days of mountain-gazing, that he told of a segment of that original group which had made their home in the mountains. The mountain-people had been able to navigate the highest trails, scale the tallest peaks, fish the ice-watery streams, camp in flowered meadows, view stars' brightest light, hear eagles scream at loudest pitch and see mountains beyond what they had ever imagined.

Somewhat embarrassed, the shopkeeper confessed that some of the mountain people had even come down to town extending an invitation to the shopkeeper and his customers to join them. They would guide anyone so desiring to come to the highlands. Some went but soon returned to the sameness of town life. Some went and made their home in the high mountains. The guide service was available, but it was not attractively promoted and packaged as was the shopkeeper's mountain store offer. Meanwhile, the shopkeeper was never able to go into the mountains. He could not leave the store. He did, however, continue to occasionally sell equipment, supplies, maps and compasses to the mountain people.

Few townspeople or tourists venture to the high country. They stay within the confines of the store. A restaurant and hotel have been added. An amusement park with a mountain theme provides hours of family fun. Some even forego the lectures and seminars on mountain life and opt for a full day doing the log ride or the simulated cliff climbing. Most everyone purchases a souvenir laminated multi-colored map and a genuine gold-plated decorative compass. They make wonderful Christmas presents and intriguing conversation pieces. The souvenir compasses do not actually work, but they are not needed anymore. There are more than enough man-made signs to guide the customers on their way back to their flatland homes. There is even a small museum featuring antique mountain equipment as displayed in a

simulated campsite. Famous people of the mountains are featured. The customers seem quite taken by such restoration efforts. Many of the more serious mountain-students spend considerable amounts of time in the museum.

The shopkeeper will retire soon. His financial future is secure. He has followed his pattern for success and that blueprint has brought its rewards. The mountain business has been good to the shopkeeper. He knew there was always more stability in map-selling than in the guide business. It is important, he would tell you, never to confuse map-selling with mountain guides. People will pay handily for maps and compasses. Those items bring practical and reliable information. Mountain guides offer quite a different commodity . . . a faith-shaking walk into a new life of transformation.

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*It was after John's arrest that Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, saying "The time has come at last—the kingdom of God has arrived. You must change your hearts and minds and believe the good news." As he walked along the shore of the Lake of Galilee he saw two fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, casting their nets into the water. "Come and follow me, and I will teach you to catch men" he cried. At once they dropped their nets, and followed him.*

(Mark 1:14-18, **Phillips Modern English**)

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