

## THE PROBLEM OF THE PLUGS

BY GEORGE H. SARGENT

DEALERS in second-hand books, collectors, librarians, and book auctioneers are alike interested in the puzzling problem of "the plugs". Probably to the last-named class the interest is not as great as to the others, for the simple reason that generally speaking they have washed their hands of it. So far as lies in their power, they will have nothing more to do with the "plugs", but the other classes cannot escape so easily. The collector has only an incidental interest in it, because in a large measure he can refrain from buying "plugs", but to the librarian the problem is a very real and pressing one, and the dealer in old books has it always with him.

"Plug" as used by the bookseller, has no exact definition, but broadly speaking it may be applied to those books, of which there are uncounted millions, which are of no salable value. The Boston book-auction firm of C. F. Libbie and Company, which after forty-one years of successful business has retired from the field, has for the past few seasons dealt largely in plugs, with the result that there was no particular profit to the original owner, the vender or the purchaser. It is an axiom in the book-auction business that it does not pay to catalogue a book which sells for less than a dollar, yet the Libbie catalogue abounded in sales of old libraries in which there were hundreds of items sold which would not pay for the cost of cataloguing. Libbie has given it up, and

the New York and Philadelphia houses do not make a practice of cataloguing these items separately, either classifying them and selling them in lots or under the head of "Miscellaneous books, 100" or "Miscellaneous books, a parcel", after the English method. The books thus sold go at low prices, as indeed they should, but the cost of cataloguing is thereby reduced to a minimum, and there may be a few cents per volume left for the owner of the material thus dispersed. The purchaser is likely to find, along with the one book that he desires, a dozen he does not want, and he is left with the problem of their disposal; for they occupy shelf room, and despite the confident assertions of the astronomers, there is a limit to space—in the general book buyer's library.

The recent sale of the library of Evert Jansen Wendell furnished a melancholy example of the difficulty of disposing of plugs to advantage. Instead of criticism, one should have only feelings of pity for the cataloguer. The amount of undesirable material dumped on the market and the astounding quantity of duplicates in the sale, not only forced the conclusion that Mr. Wendell was rather a bibliotaph than a collector, but it placed the auctioneers and the purchasers in an embarrassing position. The dealer who loaded up with sixty copies of some cheap dramatic work of which there was a possibility of selling not more than half a dozen, necessarily was precluded from making any

such liberal bid as he would had there been but one copy to be contended for; and the auctioneer had to be content with seeing record low prices made on many items which he had previously sold for good figures. And the worst of it is that this literature still remains in the world, to bother the future dealers and collectors.

To the librarian the problem of disposing of the plugs is a serious one. To him come, through donations and bequests of well-meaning people, hundreds, if not thousands of these volumes in the course of a year. Nowadays most large libraries are somewhat particular about accepting gifts with restrictions, but they generally cannot refuse to accept whole libraries in which there is a certain proportion of undesirable and undesired books. Mr. Wendell was thoughtful enough, in leaving his library to Harvard, his beloved alma mater, to rid her of the problem by placing the disposal of the undesired items in the hands of an old friend, passing along the burden. But most beneficiaries of libraries are not thus thoughtful, and so every library accumulates thousands of volumes which heretofore have been sent to auction sales, to be dispersed for what they might bring. Now that the auction houses have discovered that such items are not worth anything they decline the transaction, and the libraries seem to have no recourse left except the paper-mill. Even this resource carries a hardship, as the paper manufacturers refuse to accept the practical donation unless the donors will have the covers of the books removed, and this entails more work than the library—even in these days of low wages for library assistance—can afford to pay for.

It is not difficult, for anyone who looks through the pages of that monu-

mental work the "Publishers' Trade List", to understand why there is such an overwhelming number of plugs in the world. The literary output of a single year would fill a good-sized library. Multiply this by any number of years, and the problem of disposing of this mass of material is appalling. Happy an institution, like the John Carter Brown Library, which can claim that it does not have a book on its shelves published later than the year 1800! The American Antiquarian Society does not desire any book published in the last hundred years, but these are exceptional cases. Few libraries and still fewer dealers find themselves in such a happy position.

It is not difficult to understand how the average novel becomes a plug. The best sellers of yesterday are in the plug class tomorrow. The novel-reader's demand is for something new, and the novel of the middle of the nineteenth century has few attractions for him. People still buy Dickens and Hawthorne, but their works are in a class by themselves—the "standard" authors. The great mass of literature produced during the eighteenth century is now regarded of use as having an historical value. The literary product of the nineteenth century must wait until it becomes "old" before it can be regarded seriously by the book collector. Those works which were produced before, during, and after the Civil War, dealing with a momentous historical epoch, have largely become plugs, because there were more of them than the present-day collectors of Civil War literature can assimilate. Take, for instance, the ideal plug: "The Impending Crisis of the South; How to Meet It. By Hinton Rowan Helper. New York: 1857." This contribution to anti-slavery literature may be found in al-

most every old library formed before the war in the northern states. That a work should be once so popular and now altogether forgotten, may occasion surprise, but the explanation is found in a copy of the fourth edition, which bears pasted on its front cover a leaflet stating that a New York abolitionist has bought five hundred copies of the work for free distribution and can circulate in his own state ten times the number. Funds are solicited for this purpose, and the recipient is asked to buy five hundred more copies to be circulated in the same way. Thus, by an endless chain, this somewhat violent piece of anti-slavery propaganda was placed in every household possible, north of Mason and Dixon's line, and there many copies of it remain to this day. The issue raised is dead and the propaganda died with it, but the product of antislavery zeal survives, to vex the souls of men. A "ghost-book" has its attractions to the student of literature, but this corpse of literature still remains unburied.

Now there are some books which in their outward appearance and their prices in the auction room have all the indications of being plugs, but which do not rightly deserve the name. Their low price is due to a lack of appreciation and they are not book collectors' books because they are valuable only for their contents, and their contents appeal only to the few. Such, for instance, is "A Brief Notice of the Life of Mrs. Hannah Kinney, for Twenty Years. By Ward Witham, Her First Husband. Published by the Author. 1842." When husband and wife who have become divorced believe it necessary to place their troubles before the world in book form, the result is an addition to the gayety of communities, if not of nations, and Mr. Witham's

little book regarding his first wife and her subsequent husbands is worthy of consideration, especially with the "Appendix" as a volume of "curiosa" rather than a plug. C. H. Webb's "The Wickedest Woman in New York" with illustrations, 1868, cannot claim to be anything more than "a scarce book". It is not even "curiosa" and must go into the heap of plugs.

When Leon and Brother published their first catalogue of American first editions in 1885, they included something like three hundred authors. Undoubtedly the publication of this priced list had something to do with the increasing fancy for "firsts", but it was not until P. K. Foley's "First Editions of American Authors" appeared, in 1897, that the collectors of first editions realized what a wilderness to be traveled lay before them. It is safe to say that many of the carefully-treasured first editions of that day have now gone into the plugs, and the ease with which the common editions of our first-class American writers can be procured has placed them dangerously near the edge of the bottomless pit. The readjustment of prices has been curious. Whittier's "Moll Pitcher", in 1832, was then valued at twenty-five dollars and ranked as the rarest of Whittier first editions. "Miriam", 1871, was worth a dollar and a quarter. The former brought ninety dollars at the Halsey sale last season, and a very good copy of the latter ought to be picked up at any second-hand bookseller's at less than a dollar. The popularity of a writer leads to larger editions, and though the number of collectors increases, the competition is for the rare items issued in small editions. There are enough of the later ones to supply everybody. To the specialist in first editions they have become plugs.

But if of the making of plugs there is no end, there is a satisfaction in believing that in course of time they will disappear of their own volition, and that the plugs of yesterday will become the treasures of tomorrow. The history of book auctions is a living proof of this fact. Go through the series of volumes which make up the catalogue of the famous Heber sale in 1834 and the following years. How many of the thousands and thousands of volumes in that wholesale dispersal of printed books are now in existence? Page after page will reveal books of which not a single copy is known. Many of the works which are now eagerly sought and which have a provenance running back to the Heber sale were the plugs of that day. Who now has a copy of the undated "Court Convert, a Poem. Printed for the Author"? There were three copies in the first Heber sale, and one in the fourth. If one might pick up a copy of Henry Anderson's work of the edition which has the dedication signed by Audley, for a shilling and sixpence today, he might congratulate himself on the possession of a plug of other days. Cataloguing was not as expensive or as elaborate an affair in those times as it now is, or the result might not have been as filling to the Heber coffers; for the number of books sold for a shilling is surprisingly large, and the highest prices bear slight comparison with those of the same works today. In this accumulation of years of collecting there was an interminable mass of "junk"; yet if such a library were to be dispersed today there would be a scramble among the dealers and collectors to possess the commonest of these volumes.

It would seem as though a library of divinity, sermons, cook-books, ge-

ographies, medicine, and old school books would offer an absolutely hopeless case. But even here there is a probability that at least one volume in a thousand will prove to be of substantial value, even under the acid test of the auction room. Age itself confers no particular merit upon a book, but a book that survives the mutations of time and chance generally has some redeeming quality about it; and it may be encouraging to the collector to know that his descendants in the fourth or fifth generation may call him blessed for saving the plugs of his own day. To be sure, this does not offer a very practical solution of present difficulties, and if all the members of a family follow the example of the illustrious founder of a library and keep everything that comes their way, some means must be found for the housing and preservation of the material. Public libraries cannot adopt this plan, for duplicate books gather more rapidly than duplicate buildings, and their remedy must be found elsewhere. The bookseller, too, has not only this difficulty, but the greater one of tying up capital which might be turned over and used again, in an investment of dead stock, subject to charges for insurance and taxes.

There is a theory that no book was ever printed which was not of value, provided it could get into the right hands. Under this theory, the question of the disposal of the plugs resolves itself into one of distribution. To a certain extent, the auction room formerly furnished such a means. With this closed, the only solution along this line appears to be the establishment of a central clearing house. The difficulties of this plan appear insuperable. There remains the paper-mill, to which, after the

covers have been removed, the loathed items may be sent; but about as satisfactory a plan would be the burning of the volumes, thus utterly putting them out of the way of continuing to cause perplexity. Possibly someone might invent briquets made from the plugs, and thus help to solve the fuel problem at the same time.

The chances are, however, that libraries will be forced to dispose of their duplicates to the second-hand bookseller at his own price. In the second-hand store there is a chance that the printed book may ultimately

find its way into the hands of the one for whom it was written. The natural wear and tear will in time remove a large portion of them. When they have practically disappeared, we will miss them. Then the stock from which the bottom had dropped will begin to go up, and a new generation of plugs will go through the same process. But the problem will remain, so long as books are printed. There may be some plan worked out of getting every book into the right hands to do some good in the world. But you and I will not live to see it worked out.

## NOTES FOR A CALIFORNIA TRILOGY

BY STEWART EDWARD WHITE

IT has always seemed to me that—just as the life of the embryo has been held to epitomize the entire physical evolution of the animal, and as the social development of the child passes him rapidly through every phase, from savagery to such civilization as he possesses—so the history of California gives, in a very brief period, what elsewhere has taken hundreds or even thousands of years. We are accustomed to look on the old missions as very ancient. As a plain matter of years they are junior to many English country places whose owners consider them painfully modern. In the true sense of antiquity they are, however, indeed, very ancient, contemporaneous perhaps with the Saxon abbeys before the Norman conquest. It is not a matter of years, but of the age in evolution for which they stand. Fortunately their dilapidated appearance helps.

Thus California offers great advantage to the historical novelist. It is a

good deal of a chore, and more of a feat of divination, to penetrate the mists of centuries to a moderately true idea of the pastoral age of any civilization worth while. California was in the pastoral age fifty years ago. Living men can tell you about it, and prove you wrong. The age of pioneering lies but just beyond, and the dim age of exploration with its queer maps and its fabulous tales of fabulous monsters, only just beyond that.

Knights in armor rode the plains of Arizona, and must have felt like grilled sardines therein; padres raised the cross, and died for it, and builded mightily, and converted the Indians to the exaltation of their souls and the extinction of their bodies. Vast ranches came into being. Haughty Spanish governors established a feudal system, so that foreigners came in on bare sufferance; smugglers flourished in their picturesque calling; the church was defiled, fought down, finally despoiled.