

THE BOOKSELLER SPEAKS OUT

THE DECAY OF THE CUSTOMER

By Katherine Sproehnle

THERE fluctuates, these days, in the pictured and unpictured monthly journals, much goodly discussion of books, their habitat and their dispensers. Gracious, if grieved, gentlemen of letters have contributed to that which bulks almost into a symposium on the rise and fall of the bookshop, on the ripening and decay of the book buyer, on the incapacities of the book salesman. Some even grow irate at the relation of the book store and the customer—meaning by the book store the book clerk, to them a tool of the Gods of Ignorance, used to keep the rightful book from its lawful reader. It is to such latter that I, that child of iniquity, a book salesman, burn to make the bookseller's neglected defense. No, not defense. As the nice old man said, "I'm not arguin' with ye, I'm tellin' ye."

Which brings me to my entry in the symposium: the decay of the book buyer.

Traffic in books has a savor that any other transaction lacks. There is a thrill in picking your book from shelves or table, seeing its name inscribed on a sales slip as a deed of ownership, receiving it in your left hand as you thrust out a few dusty bills with your right, shifting its compact body in your hand as you walk out, perhaps even letting its sharp corners nip gently at your palm. (I take for granted that you carry your books home—no true book fan buys a book only to relinquish it to a delivery system.) This thrill neither chifton

frock from Paris nor custom shoes from England can approach. And the only thing that is more delightful than buying books is selling them. In most cases, that is.

According to the general, expressed opinion the customer is a firm eyed person who approaches the salesman with title, author, and publisher on his lips; the clerk an elusive mortal whose sense of spelling is deficient and whose knowledge of literature paralyzed. And I, fresh from days with customers, protest. It isn't true.

Modesty forbids me to elaborate a brief on the real accomplishments of book clerks who—undernourished, pale, overearnest lot that we are—still manage to distinguish Dreiser from Drinkwater and Mencken from Maeterlinck. Proceed rather to the customer, supposed to be so definite in his wants, so straightforward in his expressing of them. We will omit the lady who knows only that the book she is vainly trying to name is a story about New York and that "he and she make it up in the last chapter"; pass gently over the man who wanted something called "Unfinished Stories", he thought—new book—and who exclaimed triumphantly after two more or less trained minds and a supernatural ray of divination had produced Edna Ferber's "Half Portions" from the top shelf, "That's it, I knew I almost had the title." Let us dwell for a contemplative moment on the girl of today who wanted "Beowulf" by Balzac. Clerk suggested tactfully that Balzac had not, in any way, written "Beowulf". "Yes", said the girl, "he did. It's the last novel

he ever wrote." She turned to go, then relented. "Perhaps you just haven't got it yet. It's quite new."

The only really definite book buyer is the man who wants Robert Chambers's latest. Chambers is the only author he knows, or will know. He has read all of his earlier books. Q.E.D., he must have the latest or go elsewhere for his nourishment. Almost anyone else can be diverted from the "Note-books of Samuel Butler" to "The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma". It's an open trade secret that to change customers' desires for them is a necessity in a small bookshop where shelf room cannot compete with publication. And there is an unbelievably large number of merely trusting souls who turn themselves over to the salesman for mental prescriptions.

"I want", said the well nourished gentleman who came in the other morning, "three books that you have read yourself and like, on the order of E. Phillips Oppenheim's 'The Evil Shepherd'." It was an unnerving moment in my clerkly career. I was alone in the shop, as the shop's owner, who is literarily omniscient, had not arrived. I had only a little luck on my side. A few weeks before we had decided that one of us ought, for the commercial welfare of the establishment, read that book. We tossed pennies. I lost. So I had read "The Evil Shepherd", but none of its kin. However I managed to find three brethren, which I confessed only to have heard of as hair lifters, and my customer left to enjoy bloodshed in his overstuffed armchair.

"I would like", announced a tall young man, "to gain knowledge of best American philosophers. I am foreigner and I go home to Sweden next month." After all, you will ad-

mit that there is a difference in being asked to find Santayana in the stacks, realizing at the same time that he is not a Japanese print, and in being responsible for an earnest young stranger's groundwork in American philosophy. Demand what you will of the smudgy book clerk, you cannot ask him to supply what the curriculum can't.

Mercenary as it does seem, there is a charm in customers who actually purchase. There is a charm, too, in visitors who sit on our ladder and read the books which we really want to keep for ourselves, chuckle at the right places, and would like to buy so much that we pretend not to notice when they walk out emptyhanded. There is no charm, though, in the ladies and gentlemen who come in and give the most unexpected and unsolicited monologues on the literary tendencies of themselves; in the first edition hounds who come into the shop and catalogue their own library before your ears, say they realize that you don't have rare books, that they never buy anything else, and sniff at Max Beerbohm because he isn't Marlowe; in those souls whose literary enjoyment hangs on the presence or absence of an English imprint. (We have some sympathy with these last ourselves, but we conceal it and as a rule are very stern to customers who indulge in the snobbery of imprint over matter.)

It is the sins of the first of these last three varieties of customers that fall most heavily on the book salesman's head. Not that the salesman dislikes passing the time o' books with buyers—it's a rich occupation that lets you discuss the things you are most interested in. But even discussion of books should be bounded on the east by discrimination, on the

west by consideration, on the south by restraint, and on the north by the sun's time. The first fifteen minutes during which the customer pours unprinted reviews of books he has read into your ears, pulling them the while from the so painfully and alphabetically arranged shelves, the salesman listens, glassy within but pliant without. At the end of a half hour the eyes dull, shelves are furtively rearranged, thoughts of lunch, then liquor, and finally weapons come fast on each other; only when you feel that years are bowing your shoulders and lines ravaging your serene brow does the customer leave—not of course, having bought so much as a Modern Library volume. And the bookseller's reward may be the judgment of a contemporary customer who writes, "I take pains to say that I have found some who are more than polite, who are cordial and friendly."

THE MIRROR OF BOOKSELLING

By William Francis Hobson

IN a book store we may trace the origin of Blue Monday to that well known book for the tourists and those that possess Fords—to the Blue Book. Whether it is true or mere theory is a question, but it seems that Monday for the book clerk is a day filled with terrors. There are many reasons for this. Let us take one at random. The salesman who commutes arrives just before the doors are opened. He is either busy reliving a well enjoyed Sunday, or is trying to figure what the customer wants who impatiently pulls out his watch, glances through the window at the clock in the shop, and wonders why the store isn't opened. It is 8:59 by the clock in the

store and 9:00 by his Elgin. Store opens, customer rushes in. Then follows (C. being customer, S. W. C., salesman who commutes):

C.: "I want this book that I saw reviewed in the ——— yesterday."

S. W. C.: "Yes sir, what is the name of it please? . . . Oh, that book! I am sorry to say it hasn't been published in this country yet. That is an English copy the paper had and we haven't received any copies from the other side. Shall I import a copy for you or take your order for one as soon as it arrives?"

C. (greatly irritated): "But it stated here that the book is published, it doesn't say anything about it's being an English copy. How long will it take you to procure a copy? What will it cost, what will it look like, what color will the binding be, etc.?"

S. W. C.: "I am sorry sir that I cannot answer your questions. Yesterday was the first time I heard of the book; we can however find out for you if you give us sufficient time."

C.: "Time nothing, I want the book today. Guess I'll have to go to (names a well known book store); they no doubt will have copies of it. I never seem to be able to get the books I want at this store. No wonder there's no money in the book business. You never have what a customer wants." Exits muttering.

Thus starts the beginning of a perfect Blue Monday for our book salesman. At this point all thoughts of the happy Sunday have been swept aside. "Lightnin'", the floor boy, approaches and informs the S. W. C. that Mr. Knoital, the manager of Readem and Weaps Book Store, desires to see him at once. The scene now changes to the centre of the store where the manager (who also waits upon—or rather, "serves" is the better word—

his personal clientele) has part of a counter that serves as his desk.

"Well, Mr. Inbad, why haven't you fixed up the bins this morning? You know the rule is for you to have the bins in shape by 9:30; here it is that time and nothing done yet. If this keeps on perhaps you will find it easier to do them after 5:30."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knoital, but I've been busy with a customer this morning so could not get to it before. I'll start right in." Walks away dejectedly to his unpleasant task.

Customer enters and approaches Mr. Knoital: "A friend of mine recommended a volume of poetry, but I've forgotten . . ."

Mr. Knoital calls, "Miss Gusher, will you kindly show this lady the poetry?" Resumes business of writing. Customer follows Miss Gusher to the poetry alcoves and inquires, "Who is that impudent man?"

"Oh, that's OUR manager Mr. Knoital, one of the greatest bookmen in the country, no doubt in the world. He has been in the book business over thirty years. He really doesn't look his age but he told me (confidentially of course) that he has just passed his fiftieth birthday. Rather young looking, isn't he? Married too," she adds with perhaps a trace of a sigh.

"Well, whoever he is and whatever he knows, he doesn't seem very interested in what I want. I'm looking for a book, etc. . . . No, I don't know the author's name; all I know is that she wrote another book something about Eve or maybe it was Adam or perhaps Adam and Eve. It had something to do with fig leaves at any rate."

"Oh, you mean 'A Few Figs from Thistles' by Edna St. Vincent Millay don't you?" inquires Miss Gusher beamingly.

"Yes, that's the author. I want her other book."

"Which one, 'Renaissance'?"

"That's the book. What, two dollars for that small book! I'm sure my friend never paid that. Well, never mind; now that I've seen it, I don't think that I care for it at all. I'll take a copy of 'The Sheik' instead. Please wrap it up."

However, it isn't always thus in the book store. Only the other day Mr. Fulofpep, Readem and Weaps's youngest salesman, perhaps one of the youngest in the "trade" as it is affectionately called, told me the following:

Two Englishmen lately landed (odor of ocean still retained in clothing) asked Mr. Fulofpep for a guide book of the United States. Informed that the Baedeker is still the best on the subject although 1909 is the latest issue, they hesitated about purchasing it, owing no doubt to its antiquity. (I'm sure no thoughts of Baedeker being a German entered their minds.) Our youngest salesman then tried to discover what particular part of the country they were most interested in, thinking to recommend some particular book, when they seriously replied:

"What we are really after, you know, is a guide to your New York subways. It's most confusing to know whether to follow the yellow line or to take the course of the blue one. However, as we shall in time try to see all of your country, we shall purchase this book."

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday in the bookshop are about the same. Pretty good days for all. Amusing incidents take place between salesman and customer. The very best informed book clerks, even though they be disciples of Freud,

Orison Swett Marden, or Dr. Frank Crane, can't be expected to solve all of the riddles that present themselves in the form of customers asking for a book, name unknown, author unknown, to say nothing of the publisher. As for example the case where the clerk asked the inquiring lady if it might be a Little, Brown book and received the indignant retort, "It's a green covered book; that's all I know about it."

Saturday! Ah, that's a day on which I would like to see A. Edward Newton, the author of two delightful books, "The Amenities of Book-Collecting" and "A Magnificent Farce", employed as a book clerk in one of New York's big book stores. I'll wager he could write another book about bookselling, but if he prefixes it with "Amenities" it will have to be sold to book stores as an O. S. item (on sale).

Saturday is a day I always looked forward to as a schoolboy, little realizing that when I grew up and worked as a bookman my boyhood abhorrence would follow me to the book store; but it has, to the extent of our dear school teachers. Nowadays in the book world each week denotes something. We have Children's Book Week, Travel Week, Fiction Week, etc., but the school teachers have fifty-two weeks, each one of which falls on Saturday. Don't think for a moment that I speak with malice toward the educators of the world. If I did, I could not point with pride and say, "Had it not been for your wonderful patience and instruction I should never have ascended to that pinnacle of KNOWLEDGE, a BOOKMAN." My grievance is this: As I remember, if our lessons were not perfect we received a demerit, or if we repeated the offense we were kept in after school writing two or three hundred lines. Is it not

fair then, now that we are on an equal footing (if the teachers will so consider the bookseller), to ask that in making purchases on Saturdays — as they invariably do — they be specific in their demands. Let them try and reconcile themselves to the fact that a great many of the cheaper school books which "Ask Dad He Knows" used, are out of print or made in more expensive editions due to increased cost of manufacturing and the increase in the bookman's wages. And can't they be persuaded to give their pupils in writing the names of books needed for special work, instead of just saying, "Oh go to Readem and Weaps and get a geography" or whatever the book may be?

Try and help the bookseller as much as possible, book lovers of every description, and he in turn will give you in most cases the BOOK YOU WANT.

THE BOOK SALESMAN

By Matthew Baird, Jr.

"WHAT a romantic spot a bookshop is; how I would love to work in one and just browse around among the delectable editions when not too busy." That's what we hear. Ah yes, there is romance, but often it is not 100% pure, as is love or a sure tip on the ponies. There is alloy mixed with the pure base: the alloy of dust; the alloy of one hundred copies of a fast waning favorite and the bill in the drawer; the alloy of trying to please the customer; and the alloy of discussing juveniles with a doting mamma when your thoughts are with Mencken and his Prejudices.

You stand in the aisle, during a leisure spell, and look out on the crowded thoroughfare, thoughts thousands of

miles away, and thousands of books crying to be sold. The door opens and in wafts some cold air—and a lady. She's hunting for a book. They all are and we're the beaters. No, she doesn't know what she would rather have, and you attempt to check your thoughts at the right book as you mentally go galloping between Thomas à Kempis's "Imitation of Christ", and Théophile Gautier's "Mlle. de Maupin". She must notice from a look on your face the breathless steeplechase you are having, for she quietly removes a fence from the course by saying, "It's for someone who is sick." You quickly note the age and the bare third finger of the left hand and eliminate husband and child, at the same instant that Gautier goes into a convent and à Kempis to a ball game. "An elderly person?" you nonchalantly ask, as you look straight ahead and toy with your watch chain. "No." It is breathed out as you say "Ah" for the doctor whose vandyke is roaming on your back. "It's for a young man, a cousin of my mother's." A karma of embarrassment envelops the statement and brands the cousin lie. To be a good salesman you must then give a dry sob and quickly clench the hand that is resting on a book within her gaze. "Yes, he has had his left leg amputated." Your heart pours out to her in her misery, and you see visions of a crutchy wedding, crutchy home and children. In your innermost self you wish it had been his head. All you do is murmur, "Left leg?" As though had it been the right leg you could have given her the choice of hundreds of books, you grope about looking for a literary substitute for a left leg amputation. You cannot suggest "The Stretcher Bearer"—that's too much of a probe in the wound; neither would you offer

"Westward Ho". She wouldn't see the application any more than you would. Desperation clutches you as you wander ever onward to the children's book department, when as manna from heaven a thought strikes you. You grab the first book, which happens to be one of a hundred sheep dog stories, quickly wrap it up and hand it to her, as you beg her not to question your decision but simply accept it. You tell her in a jerky way that you remember a similar case last August—or was it July?—when you were commissioned to supply a book for a left leg amputation and this book so admirably filled the bill that the patient is going to have his other leg taken off if the author writes another story. You take the two dollars and in your nervousness put it into your pocket, instead of the cash drawer, and the transaction is closed.

You pick up a half morocco Swinburne, take a good drink of "Dolores", and again face a problem. A young man is standing with a she's-caught-me look and you ask him tenderly as to his book yearning. Yes—you already knew it—a gift book for a lady. You are immediately irritated by his brazen confession of intimacy with the fair one; what right has he to suppose in his callow self-importance that he can make her happy? You recite a few lines of "The Lady of Lyons". You remember, "Mother I did send her flowers and she did wear them." You get that far and he takes the book; his seventy-five is nestling with the amputation two dollars.

You quickly recognize the wan expression of the next seeker and pick up Crozer Griffith's "Care of the Baby" and the "Century Cook Book". She takes her choice and no word is spoken. If she has a lustreless look in her eyes she takes both.

Then you are confronted with a vision in silks, satins, furs, frankincense and myrrh. Through her lip stick results she lisps that she desires "A Thousand Ways to Please a Husband"; you give it to her, all the while wondering why she wants a thousand when you feel positive she has never tried one. Where is she now? Probably on her way to buy a new gown and antidote at least five hundred of the thousand ways. Dear delightful little human parasite, but we love her and she doesn't need the vote to be happy. *We* will make her so. Another Eve, a sister of the last species, is poring over a three dollar book when you rubber heel to her proximity. By the way, it takes a very nice distinction to know just when to put on the emergency in approaching irresistible femininity. You lay your hand softly on an adjacent tome as though you were about to say "Nice bookie". As you feel her osprey feathers or birds of paradise or whatever you call two hundred dollars' worth of South American caudal appendage sweep your wan emaciated hand, she begins "How well I remember" You hope she is going to say how well she remembers Sweet Alice Ben Bolt; but no, it's that old story about remembering when books were a dollar eight. Yes, and you remember when eggs were thirty cents a dozen and shoes seven per. I have some regard for the man who invented a dollar and a quarter, and a kindly feeling for the lesser light who discovered a dollar, but that miscreant who foisted a dollar eight on this already overburdened world should share the fate of the one who invented poison ivy and nettle rash.

You go callously through the next hour with class A B and C customers until you meet your triweekly prob-

lem. She doesn't know the name of the book and gives you a withering look if you attempt to go into research by asking the author's name. She knows you must have it; all book stores have it. There is a girl in it who is in love with a man, and another woman is in love with him. At this point you call the sales specialist in the eternal triangle department, and even she is stumped. Out the fair one goes, her manner indicating that she would fain arrange for you a night course in literature. If only she had remembered that one of the women had blond hair, we could by elimination have brought the choice down to one of 267. We inwardly say "Pshaw" or some synonym and thank Soulé and Crabb for their aid in relieving pent up feeling.

A breezy individual appears in the offing, her topsails shot with fire, and wants to know if a book will reach her very dear friend Mrs. Spoof who is sailing first cabin on the S. S. "Heaveto" on Saturday. You warble a complete yes and then she goes to picking. The backs of four books are broken in her haste not to delay the shipment, when she bethinks herself of "White Shadows in the South Seas". Feeling absolutely certain that Mrs. Spoof is a bad sailor and shouldn't have sea stories, you timidly suggest "Roaming Through Changing Germany", but it doesn't work and poor Mrs. Spoof will a-seaing go.

All these different problems are interspersed with isolated questions. Do Ethel Dell's books come in the Nelson Library edition? Will Harold Bell Wright bring out another book this week? Yes, I know he had one last week. Is it in "Pickwick" or "Vanity Fair" that some woman says, "Speak for yourself, John", and myriad other queries that tax the soul.

The shadows lengthen; closing time is approaching and the salesman at eve has sold his fill. Five-thirty will soon be here. No customers for the past hour; but now at 5:27 not the flotsam and jetsam but rather the ivory, peacocks, and golden moidores of the purchasing public flock in as at a rummage sale. You are tired and irritable and want to go home, or to someone else's home, and still they come. You stand on one foot and then on the other, while a purchaser is perusing Balden's "Heartease", you the while wishing you had a copy of the more soothing Allen's Footease.

Books are being put back in their places, you hear the whirl of the safe's combination as the bookkeeper ends her day, and just as your thoughts are beginning to take a soup, fish, and best girl channel, in blow the last three rows of the cast of a musical comedy. By paying attention to the

squeakiest one you gather that Tottie Coughdrops is leaving the show on Saturday and "we girls want to give her a swell book". You head the procession to the glass-cased de luxes. In a paternal way you pat a crushed levant "Vicar of Wakefield", at the same time reaching for a tree calf "Marcus Aurelius". One of the dears says they can't take both as they have only ten dollars. She thought it two volumes of the same story, the second volume being the one in which Marcus marries the vicar's daughter. But, after all, what do we know of stagecraft?

All have gone, the lights are dim, the front door locked. You take your hat, bow obsequiously to the Empress Eugénie, reverently salute Chief Justice Marshall, throw a kiss to Manon Lescaut, and go into the night, making a mental resolve to abstain from all reading, yea even a time table.

THE PINES ARE THINKING

(Indian Interpretation)

By Hartley Alexander

THE cottonwood trees,
growing in clumps, —
They are very loquacious,
conversing with one another.

But the tall pines
are like men in meditation,
They seldom have anything to say.

In winter the leaves of the cottonwoods
are fallen,
Their branches are shelterless;
But the pine trees are always green.