

# Random House

EDITH M. STERN

SIXTEEN years ago, two young men bought the publishing rights to a reprint series known as the Modern Library from Boni and Liveright. To Horace Liveright at the time, the purchase price of \$200,000 represented the shrewdest deal he had ever made—and the publishing industry as a whole was inclined to agree with him. But today, Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer regard their acquisition of the Modern Library as a publisher's home run with the bases loaded. This year alone, more than 1,300,000 copies in the series have been sold, making a grand total of almost twelve million books since the Modern Library was reorganized under the two young men in 1925.

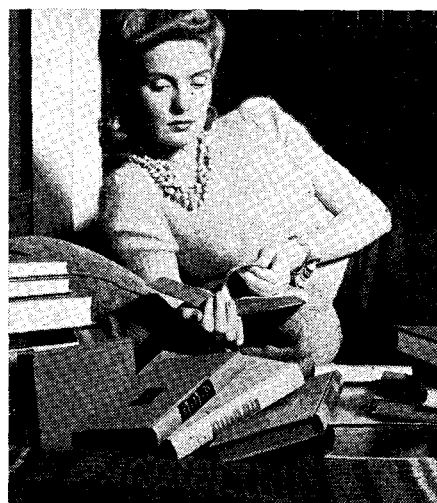
The origin of this reprint series is lost in the relative antiquity of First World War days, with claimants for the honor of its conception as numerous as competitors for Homer's birthplace—Albert Boni, Thomas Seltzer, Horace Liveright, and T. R. Smith among them. At any rate, when Cerf and Klopfer took over, the Modern Library consisted of 109 titles, bound in imitation leather that smelled like the inside of a taxi-cab, and having an unpleasant habit of sticking to each other when placed on shelves. Even so, and with little promotion at Boni and Liveright, sales had been about 275,000 annually. At ninety-five cents, you couldn't keep good titles down, when they were otherwise out of print or available only at high prices.

The partners, with characteristic dynamism, proceeded to clean house. In the first years of their ownership they threw out no fewer than forty titles—slow sellers, deadwood, and unimportant oddities by friends of friends of friends of the house of Liveright. Next, without raising the price, they changed binding, widened margins, introduced picture jackets, arranged attractive displays. They have been throwing out and adding titles, and improving format, ever since. In 1931 they introduced the Modern Library Giants—books such as "War and Peace" and "Boswell's Johnson," too long to be conveniently printed in the regular edition—at \$1.25. Today the Giants number fifty-eight of the total 278 titles. The "Giant" price has just been raised to \$1.45—but they are still hoping to keep the 95 cent level for the regular series.

Thousands of readers continually send in their suggestions for new volumes to be added to the series. The

Modern Library embraces such apparent anomalies as "The Complete Novels of Jane Austen" and James Farrell's "Studs Lonigan"; "The Travels of Marco Polo" and Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises"; Gibbon's "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" and "The Collected Short Stories of Ring Lardner." Underlying the chronological and stylistic heterogeneity is the homogeneity of the word "Modern." And "modern," the library's publishers believe, signifies whatever has meaning in contemporary life and thought, regardless of original publication date. So they scrap Cabell and Anatole France titles because delicate and "civilized" irony is now as passé as the Mencken *Mercury*, flappers, and the Left Bank, and add Plato's "Republic" and Machiavelli's "The Prince" and "The Discourses" because men are now groping for ideas and guidance in government.

IT is this sensitivity to contemporary trends which, more than anything else perhaps, has helped Random House develop to distinguish maturity. Originally, there was a single corporation, The Modern Library. Then, in 1927, when champagne tastes were being gratified by champagne pocketbooks, it was quite in order for the publishers of inexpensive reprints to go in for deluxe and limited editions. Random House, a second and separate corporation, was established. It became exclusive American agent for the English Nonesuch Press's exquisite editions of the classics; issued Americana glorified



"Editorial workers at Random House combine pulchritude with sagacity." The caption for this photograph was written by Bennett Cerf, who delights in writing his own publicity for Random House.

by Rockwell Kent; and, U. S. Steel and Radio Corporation of America being what they were, profitably published the Grabhorn Press edition of Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" to retail at one hundred dollars.

The depression came, and the market for expensive books went. As an economy measure, the Modern Library and Random House merged under the latter name, and the firm began to pay attention to a general trade list. When Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, Inc., became part of Random House in 1936, they brought with them such substantial properties as William Faulkner, André Malraux, Isak Dinesen, Edgar Snow, and a flock of juveniles.

"Why do you call yourselves Random House?" I asked Bennett Cerf.

"Because we decided to publish books at random—any books we liked," he answered promptly.

A good line: Cerf is an expert at good lines. But, obviously, the house publishes books less with a fine, free carelessness than with a shrewd and cultivated appraisal of what the well-read reader will read: James Joyce's "Ulysses," "The Complete Works of Marcel Proust," and Havelock Ellis's unabridged "Studies in the Psychology of Sex" in the mid-thirties; Lewis L. Lorwin's "Economic Consequences of the Second World War," Budd Schulberg's "What Makes Sammy Run," and John Strachey's "Digging for Mrs. Miller" on the current list; attractive, readable editions of the classics, like the Jowett translation of Plato and "The Complete Greek Drama," which has sold 13,000 copies within two years; and a classic-to-be, "The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt."

Saxe Commins, grave, scholarly editor, late of Liveright, friend of Eugene O'Neill and of Gene Fowler, is responsible for many of the titles on both the Modern Library and the trade lists. Harry Maule, another editor, former vice-president of Doubleday, Doran and Company, brought with him, in the fall of 1939, Sinclair Lewis, Vincent Sheean, William McFee, and Mignon Eberhart, and specializes in Westerns and romances. The three partners—Bennett A. Cerf, Donald S. Klopfer, and Robert K. Haas—have their particular provinces. Cerf does advertising and publicity, writes every line of every news note himself. Klopfer concerns himself with sales, Haas with manufacturing. But each is an editor, too, with his own authors and his own enthusiasms. So close is the firm's integration of editing, manufacturing, and promotion, that everyone, *mirabile dictu*, actually reads the juveniles published in a separate department.

There are no formal meetings to decide this or that; only sporadic, free-

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DECEMBER 6, 1941

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for-all conferences with all having the say about one and one about all. Bennett Cerf, for instance, dashes through the office brandishing a jacket design for a murder story, asking "What do you think of it?" . . . Saxe Commins looks up from the Greek manuscript he is pencilling to give his opinion . . .

It's a gay place, Random House, smart with modern furniture, amusing gadgets, clever showcase displays. Its personnel has an air of youth—not the strained juvenility of the middle-aged trying to be collegiate, but the genuine youthfulness of people who enjoy what they're doing and stay alive to the times. Usually it's depressing to run across your contemporaries for the first time in years. But Pauline Kreiswirth, "Jezebel" to her intimates, secretary to Cerf and Klopfer, looks exactly the same as she did when I knew her, fifteen years ago, at Boni and Liveright. So does Louise Bonino, juvenile editor, who used to hand me Smith and Haas review copies in the early thirties.

Bennett Cerf and Donald Klopfer chaffer across desks placed close together in a book-lined office they share; they have been friends since boyhood. Cerf has had himself publicized and glamorized as a playboy, loves to play

the comedian. He sent out burlesque news notes:

To the Book Editors—Well, why not? YOU've printed a thousand like them: . . . Augusta Phillip writes her publishers, Random House, that she has moved from the fourth floor of 532 West 137th Street to the seventh floor of 686 East 129th Street . . . Romney Tillingholme is completing a new mystery story on the tablecloth at Reuben's . . . Vladimir Pizitz, second assistant bookkeeper of Random House, returned yesterday on car number 079 of the BMT from a tour of Brooklyn and Flatbush, where he saw several important authors and discussed their new books with them.

Cerf wrote about his firm in that sober trade publication, *The Herald Tribune Book News*, as Eloise Glotz's "alluring picture of life among the glamorous fleshpots of 57th Street" and filled it with descriptions of the office's pet trained seal, Klopfer's Foreign Legion background, and Robert Haas's emergence from the elevator on roller skates. But the cap and bells cover a hard business head. It is not incongruous that Cerf spent two lucrative years on Wall Street between his editorship of the Columbia College *Jester* and his apprenticeship at Boni and Liveright.

Witness, there, of the Liveright trag-

edy, he says he learned that he must keep the book publishing business strictly a book publishing business. In 1933, when Liveright went bankrupt and publishers stormed the New York office of Eugene O'Neill's agent to sign up the dramatist, Cerf took a plane to Sea Island, talked with O'Neill himself, and captured the prize. Random House has indulged its impulse towards the theatre by publishing plays. Almost every important contemporary playwright—Clifford Odets, George Kaufman and Moss Hart, Lillian Hellman, S. N. Behrman, Sidney Kingsley, and Clare Boothe—is on its list. The 2,200 amateur play groups in the United States, theatre-goers who like to read the plays they have seen, and a large proportion of the population of Hollywood, gobble the printed plays.

Donald Klopfer was in the diamond business, and hated it; Robert Haas was one of the founders of the Book-of-the-Month Club before he became a trade publisher. The triumvirate sponsors class, in writing, in format, even in location. Random House has its offices on the fifth, eighth, and twelfth floors, not in a building in any of the usual publishing districts, but at 20 East 57th Street, in the heart of New York's smartest shopping street.

THE class note strikes, too, in Random House's juvenile department. It is headed by the lovely Louise Bonino, who began her publishing career in the early twenties as secretary to the late Joel Spingarn at Harcourt, Brace and Company, then was general secretary and in charge of advertising and publicity with Smith and Cape, later Smith and Haas. One evening, at a party, someone showed her a French juvenile, "Babar, the Little Elephant," purchased at the Washington Square Bookshop. Miss Bonino was enchanted, as over two hundred thousand readers have been enchanted since. Next day Smith and Haas cabled for the American rights to the Babar books, now Random House's.

Many of Random House's juvenile authors—Marjorie Fischer, Constance Burnett, Esther Hall, and Eleanor Wheeler among them—are members of Mabel L. Robinson's Columbia class in juvenile writing. A new venture in juveniles is a fifty cent and one dollar series. Just as the Munsey newspaper mergers combined "the best features of each," so this series welds the low-cost feature of the Modern Library with the Random House tradition of fine illustrations and format. Its success has the partners reeling.

Manny Harper has been the accountant and office manager of the firm since it was organized. Cerf recognized his talents in the old Liveright days. Herbert Cahn, manufacturing mana-

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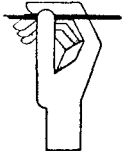
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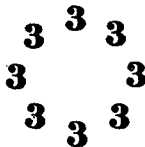
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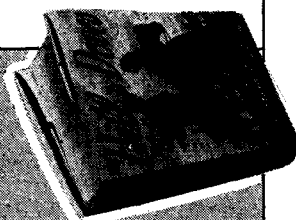
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# \* Best sellers make good gifts

\* Five of the six titles here listed appeared on the national best seller list of November 30. The sixth, "Mrs. Appleyard's Year," was then just published. Our orders indicate that it too will appear on the list by the time this advertisement appears.

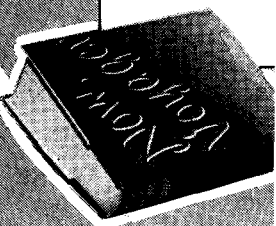
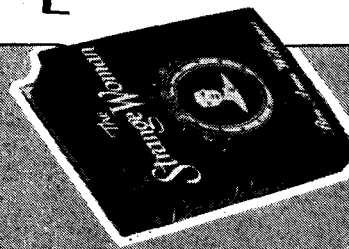
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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

ger, hails from the Viking Press; Lewis Miller, sales manager, from Doubleday, Doran. A great gap in the staff occurred last summer, when Bennett Cerf's father died. Latterly he handled credit; from the firm's inception had been its official critic. Beloved by everyone from elevator boys to Random House's most distinguished authors, he was universally known as "Pop."

Highlights of the current list are Vincent Sheean's new novel, "Bird of the Wilderness," Longstreet's "Last Man Around the World," "The 1942 New Yorker Album," and George R. Stewart's "Storm," December Book-of-the-Month. The \$12.50, four-volume edition of Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past" has been reissued in two volumes at five dollars. "Babar" is available at one dollar a volume. The firm hopes that the rising costs of book manufacture won't interfere with its inexpensive, fine editions, sold at small margins. But even if the world turns another somersault, there are no indications that Random House will undergo any serious breakage. For a sixteen-year old, it has a substantial backlist. Even more important, it seems to have found the secret of perpetual contemporaneity.

*Next in this series will be the publishing house of Farrar & Rinehart.*

## Odyssey for Humanity

**LET THERE BE MERCY.** *The Odyssey of a Red Cross Man.* By John Maloney. With a Foreword by Theodore Roosevelt. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1941. 337 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by JAMES E. G. FRAVELL

**A**S a former correspondent and world traveller, John Maloney was thoroughly familiar with Europe before he was commissioned by the Red Cross as special observer to make a survey and report of relief and political conditions in Europe. This account of his trip through war-torn Europe is rich in human interest, inspiring in its stories of heroism.

Starting his "Odyssey" in Paris at a meeting with the President of the French Red Cross, Mr. Maloney went first to Geneva, then to Poland, next to Hungary, then in quick succession to Slovakia, Rumania, Yugoslavia, the Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, and Belgium, finally to return to Paris only in time to join the tragic stream of refugees on the highways leading south.

He remained in Switzerland only long enough to acquaint himself with the work carried on by the International Red Cross at Geneva, of which the

American Red Cross is a part. In Geneva 8,000 workers, all but six hundred of them volunteers, were handling daily as many as 60,000 letters and telegrams inquiring about prisoners of war; eloquent commentary on the suffering and mental anguish of countless families.

From a trembling Paderewski the author received his first authentic facts about what had happened and was still taking place in Poland. "Our only hope for life," said the musician-statesman, "again is fastened on the United States. I know that in the end America will bring sanity and justice into the world once more."

Paderewski's plea did not go unanswered. Shortly thereafter the Red Cross established soup kitchens, clothing and distribution centers, clinics, all using American supplies. One hundred such kitchens in Warsaw alone were serving 100,000 "meals" daily, a meal consisting of a half-liter of hot soup. Before relief operations were brought to a close, one million dollars of American Red Cross goods had been distributed in Poland.

Following the wave of refugees into Hungary and Rumania, Mr. Maloney saw thousands of bewildered soldiers and civilians—some wounded, others with sacking in place of shoes, all quartered in inadequate shelters, all hungry; yet despite the general wretchedness and misery, not a word of complaint, only fears for family and those left behind.

Tragic Finland, too, could count only on American Red Cross help for medicines and hospital supplies. It was the same story in Norway, Belgium, Holland, France: the swift descent of the Stukas, the frightened civilians, the pitiful, despairing refugees, the appalling lack of order and authority, the complete disorganization; yet amid all this terror and confusion the individual courage and heroism. And always it was the Red Cross which secured drugs and food from rapidly dwindling supplies, which established centers of distribution, which maintained hospitals in the midst of bombardment. And always it is the little people whose heroism impresses one most in this vivid story.

Mr. Maloney makes light of the dangers he faced and the discomforts he endured. His account will make every American proud of the part our Red Cross is playing in alleviating human misery.

*James E. G. Fravell has recently returned from Unoccupied France, where for seven months he was a special representative of the American Red Cross.*

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