

# THE BOOKSELLER SPEAKS OUT

## THE DECAY OF THE CUSTOMER

By Katherine Sproehle

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."