

IS THE DEMAND FOR DICKENS AS GREAT AS IT USED TO BE?

Book Dealers Tell of a Great Falling Off in the Popular Favor Accorded the Famous Novelist.

NOW that Dickens's centenary has come around, one wonders what demand there is to-day for his works. Fifty years ago, here and in England, he was more widely read than any other author, living or dead. Has he kept, or nearly kept, his hold on the public?

A book of Dickens's, it was found, doesn't sell as fast as a popular new book. Now, there is nothing surprising in this, because most new books flare up like sky rockets and then fade away into obscurity. Dickens is a steady seller, which the new book isn't.

But the following fact is evidence that the public of to-day is not fond of its Dickens: his books do not sell as well as those of authors in his class, or near his class, who have lived after him. Robert Louis Stevenson, for instance, is bought more often than he.

Here is what the different stores say of the demand for Dickens:

Wanamaker's: "Ten years ago we used to sell between 400 and 500 sets per year. Now we only sell between 100 and 200."

Brentano's: "Dickens is the cornerstone of every man's library. He is as necessary in a library as a table is in a dining room. Dickens is to fiction what Shakespeare is to poetry. As to sales—no, Dickens isn't as much in demand as O. Henry. No, he isn't as popular as the best books of the season.

"Most of our Dickens is bought in sets.

The greatest call for him is from people who are starting up libraries and know they ought to have him.

"Those of these people who are wealthy want very fine sets. We keep editions the price of which is \$500."

What a comparison to the way Dickens came out in his own day! He appeared every week in cheap little magazines, and this appearance was an event in the lives of pretty nearly everybody who could read in England and America.

Witness the following letter written from London by a Miss Anne Browning to a friend in the country:

"My dear," writes Miss Browning, "has your latest Dickens come? Mine has not appeared, and truly I am disconsolate. I have been looking forward to it all week—the last number stopped so suddenly and in an exciting place, too—and besides I solemnly promised to give it on last Thursday to my aunt, who was to hand it on to a friend of hers, who vows he likes Thackeray better. If the new number is anything as good as the last one I am sure he will be converted. Mother had declined an invitation to play cards last week on the day we expected the latest chapters, and now, of course,

she is cross. We were going to read them out loud so that nobody would have to wait to hear them. Mother says that Agnes is in love with David Copperfield and that she's going to marry him in a couple of numbers; but I don't believe it, she is much too friendly to him. Don't you think so?"

And now Dickens is selling in \$500 sets to persons who buy him in a conscientious spirit!

Scribners report that the demand for Dickens is "pretty fair." They have two exclusive editions which go off nicely, one edited and with an introduction by Andrew Lang, and the other a centenary edition which sells 20 cents cheaper per volume than the same quality of book has hitherto done.

The single volume people buy most seems to be "Child's History of England." This is strange because the history is not a wonderful piece of writing, and most of Dickens's books are. The explanation probably is that the history is more nearly unique than any of the other works.

Scribners mentioned an interesting fact. They said that although Dickens doesn't sell as well as the inferior authors who lived after him do, he sells better than the

authors almost his equals who lived in his day. He runs far ahead of Thackeray and Eliot.

The second-hand book dealers tell a curious story. With them the demand for Dickens seems to vary according to the neighborhood.

A man who keeps a second-hand bookshop on 125th Street was the one person who told of really first-rate sales among all the dealers in books, first or second-hand. He said that in his shop Dickens was always in demand. He immediately offered a capital proof of his assertion. Taking it for granted that the questioner wanted to sell a couple of volumes and couldn't quite get up enough courage to say so, the book dealer remarked: "You have some of his books that you wish to sell. Well, I give you good prices for them."

Now, on Twenty-third Street, the manager of a book exchange said that Dickens was little called for. "Why," he said, "we seldom hear his name. The men our people want are Zola, Shaw, Chesterton, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and the two James. Our—what shall I call them—the circle who buy from us? Well, they are very serious people. They

are poor and serious. And they like sociological or psychological books. I myself like those sorts, and I draw around me, I suppose, those who have the same tastes as myself. The drama, anyway, is getting to be more popular than the novel. Dickens!" and the bookseller pursed up his lips and shook his head.

He said that some prominent librarian whose name he couldn't think of had classed Dickens as a juvenile. He wanted to go to the back of the store to see if one of his clerks knew this name, but a very shabby looking man next to him with either a future or a past (one can never tell which, began to ask so eagerly and so often for "War and Peace" that he couldn't get away.

The further downtown you go, the less of Dickens the second-hand book-dealers sell. Far down, Gorky, Tolstoy, Karl Marx—serious, revolutionary writers—are the ones who make the hit. Dickens with his come-gather-round-the-fire-and-we'll-all-have-a-fine-time-spirit seems completely out of touch with the people down there.

On the whole, judging from first and second hand book dealers both, it seems as if Dickens, like Kipling and Mark Twain in one hundred years, no doubt, can not be said to be widely cared for, any longer. But that he is deeply cared for those of us who read him ourselves, or have friends who read him, know. The people who are fond of him are very fond of him.