

HOW WE LOOK TO THE YOUNG WOMAN BACK OF THE DESK IN THE LIBRARY

PERHAPS you think because he's the man in the street he doesn't read, but that's where you are mistaken. Ten to one he reads better books than you do. You buy your books, he borrows his. You put yours on your bookshelves to be read when you shall get a quiet hour, he reads his and borrows some more.

It was a cab driver who pointed out to me the beauty of Mazzini's essay on Goethe.

The New York Public Library circulated more than seven and a half million books last year. I mean that this number of books were taken into the homes of the people—it does not include the books used for reference, nor does it include the enormous circulation of the Brooklyn and Queens Borough libraries.

Only 5 per cent. of this seven and a half million books was in foreign languages—a most amazing fact when one remembers how many New Yorkers do not read, write, or even speak English. The city buys the books and pays for their distribution, but it is the girl behind the counter that does the actual work, gives the tone to the branch libraries, of which Manhattan and the Bronx have forty, and gets the fun with the reading public.

She must have a sense of humor—it is absolutely necessary. She must not only see herself as others see her, she must see themselves as others see themselves.

She must be gently needleworkish with the old lady who wants a new pattern in drawn-work. She must be militantly suffragettish with the sister who wants to go to prison for the cause. She must be humble with the man who considers her a menial. She must try to act the part, since she cannot look it, when appealed to as a twenty-volume encyclopaedia. She must feel a warm sympathy for all isms, she must have a working knowledge of all ologies.

She must never resent rudeness. Her prejudices, her personal tastes, her feelings must be hidden away. She must remember, always smilingly, that she is a servant of the public.

This public with which the librarian has to deal is made up of all sorts and conditions of men, from scholars and litterateurs to hoboes and thieves, of both sexes, of every nation under the sun.

I suppose that it is true that no man is a hero to his valet, certainly no man is brilliant to the librarian, for it is to us that men come to find out what they do not know, and we see the hastily erected and shabby skeletons that support many popular lectures and "brilliant special articles."

It is amazing how dull the quick-witted New Yorker is about little things. He cannot open a door that opens in unless there is a large sign "Push" on it; he cannot fill out properly the simplest application. I call on all postal money order clerks to confirm the truth of this. If a

sign reads, "The library will be closed on December 25" some one is sure to ask, "For how long?"

But if we think our public is sometimes a bit dense, they return the compliment by thinking we are at all times—Mars. When we say we have a book, but it is out, they are sure it is not; if we say a book is uninteresting, they are sure it is risqué and we are trying to prevent its circulation.

Just what is off-color seems to be a disputed point, for a young man who blushing returned Sterne's "Sentimental Journey" said he could not understand why we did not have "Three Weeks," it was "so charming."

One of the most difficult demands to satisfy is the frequent request for "a funny book."

Now, if you have ever thought about it you know that there is no standard of funniness. Vague though it may be, we have a line above or below which a thing is good or bad as to plot, construction, style; but when it comes to the quality called humor, every man is a law unto himself. The book that one person says is "roaringly funny" another calls "deadly dull."

A very nice person returns a book saying, "This is so funny we read it aloud, and I left the family still laughing." Another man slams the same book down on your desk an hour after he has taken it home and cries in fiery tones, "Do you call this funny?" or "Don't you know the difference between vulgarity and wit?" and goes out murmuring bits of the letter he is going to write the newspapers about gross misuse of the city's money.

Noms de plume of authors often cause funny mistakes. A young lady wanted "Adam Bede." I told her to look on the shelves under "Cross." In about ten minutes she came back to my desk and said, "I must be awfully stupid not to be able to see it, but I've looked all over the walls, and I can't find a cross, so how can I look under it for 'Adam Bede'?" I had to own that the cross was invisible save to the initiated.

In the library you learn that words are capable of many definitions. A reader wanted books by a certain author "because her books are so rich." I said I thought them light rather than rich. "Then," she said, "you can't be at all familiar with them, because she writes about rich people only."

At the Riverside branch of the library one lady who sends her maid for her books lets the maid select them. At least the maid asserts that her mistress likes to have her do it. One day she started home with two books, both of them small and lightly bound; one was "Lessons in Applied Mechanics" the other "The Story of the Fishes." The librarian, knowing the lady's taste to be of the yellow-back-French variety, remonstrated,

She Tells of the Queer Things We Do and the Queer Things We Say When We Go There to Get a Book.

"No," the maid said, "I must have these; she said bring her something light." And take them she would.

A man returned Tolstoy's "Resurrection," saying, "I simply couldn't read this; please give me a clean book. I didn't like to have this in my house; give me any sort of a love story, provided it is clean." I brought him a much-used copy of "The Story of an Untold Love." He gave it and me a disdainful look and walked over to the shelves and took down a perfectly new copy of Balzac's "Cousin Bette." "I'll take this. This is what I call clean."

To my surprise a new member, an Irish under-groom, took the "Life of Pope Leo XIII.," a very scholarly and bulky volume. I asked him if he wanted the book for study. "No, ma'am," he said, "I just want to read. I said the other day to Jim Mitchell, I said, 'I niver hev read a book,' and Jim Mitchell he says to me he says, 'There's a liberry, go get a book and read,' and when I saw this I says to meself, 'What's better to start on thin the Blessid Pope?'"

It was hard to convince him that it was better to let that life crown, rather than begin, his literary career. The meagre amount of circumstantial evidence given us by which to find a book ought to make us objects of envy to all detectives desiring experience. But even an acute Sherlock Holmes can decline to take a case; we can't. If the public wants a book, we must produce it; that's what the library is for. A man wanted a certain book; he could not remember the author or title; he had not read it, so did not know the plot. He did know that the title had in it the name of one of the leading cities of a State and that the author once wrote a book that had a large sale. It was "The Tallahassee Girl," by Thompson, who wrote the one-time popular "Alice of Old Vincennes."

A bright-faced lad wanted a book, and all he knew about it was that his mother saw a dramatization of it played seven or eight years ago. "It was the one," he said, with a quick gesture over his left shoulder, "with the curls." "Janice Meredith," and Mary Manning. And the small boy who comes for books for the rest of the family! I was in despair till I found out that the key to his list of wants lay in repeating what he said very rapidly and out would fall some well-known title; "House Built on

Sticks," "SI Smarner," "Comic Philosophy," "Useless," "Romula and Julia," and so on ad infinitum. It took me quite five minutes to discover that "poetry that answers back" is but another name for dialogues.

If the librarian is forced to become a detective to satisfy her public, that public in its turn gives her so many facts concerning the working of the human mind that she becomes quite easily a psychologist. Her first great discovery is that people are all very much alike. Those who join the library for the sake of desultory reading, (and this I should say is the large body of readers) will take home old popular books, such things as "The Wandering Jew," "Children of the Abbey," "Ten Thousand a Year." I asked a number of people why they wanted to read the particular book chosen, and the invariable answer was "I've heard about this book all my life but have never happened to read it." The words varied, of course; the idea was the same.

It is a noticeable fact that readers who have no special book in mind will select books from the shelves that are about on a level with their eyes rather than from the high or low shelves. You know before she opens her lips the woman who belongs to the "has-read-somuch" type and the "business-takes-all-my-time" club man who wants you to select a book for his wife. I am going to tell one thing about men that I am sure it is mean to tell; indeed it is betraying a confidence. It is a thing of which the average man is ashamed, very much ashamed. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he reads and enjoys the magazines that are exclusively women's magazines.

Nuts to Crack

A woman is apt to take a man for what he is worth, and the more he is worth the quicker she'll take him.

Lots of us burden ourselves by putting on more airs than we can carry.

The fellow with red hair should have no hesitancy in telling a girl he would dye for her.

The most humble can sometimes make an opening for others. Take the grave digger, for instance.

The confidence of the public in printed lists of books illustrates how instinctively man clutches at any old straw. You may say to a reader, "Every book in this section is carefully chosen, every book there is interesting and well written." He listens politely, though bored, and answers: "I want one that is on this list," and will show you a scrawl copied from the back pages of some worthless novel and insist that they are good books because at the head of the list was printed "Other interesting books." But even ahead of his faith in the printed word is his belief in the worth of any book he has "heard a friend speak of."

The librarian invariably prides herself upon the ability to select for a reader the kind of book he will enjoy. I used to have a feeling of great superiority whenever a man returned a book and said, "How could you know that I, a stranger whom you had never seen before, would like this book? Please select another for me," for I felt that it was literary acumen. This bit of vanity was exploded by a waiter in a Broadway restaurant. I was at lunch with some friends, and when we reached dessert we could not decide what to take. One of the party said, "Suppose we leave it to the waiter." We did, and he brought to each of us something that suited our individual tastes. We were amazed.

"But how did you know?" we asked. "I think of nothing else," he answered. "I study men and women; it is what makes the life of a waiter possible to a man of intelligence."

The American public is constantly warned by the manufacturers of soaps and breakfast foods to put no faith in the men who say "I haven't that, but here's something just as good." Now that is what the librarian, the honest librarian, says all day long. "We haven't 'Peck's Bad Boy,' but here is the 'Story of a Bad Boy.'" "We haven't 'He Loved Alas a Frozen Bride,' but the 'Jessamy Bride' is lovely." Always we urge our readers to take something that is not only just as good, but a wee bit better.

The library takes every precaution to secure the member's own signature to the pledge on the printed application for membership—a pledge to take care of the books and return them. Yet when a messenger called at a fashionable apartment on upper Broadway to get a book borrowed by Mr. Suker de Lespenasse he was told by the maid who answered the bell that there was "no M. de Lespenasse, only Madame

lives here alone." The messenger insisted; he knew that Madame lived there, but she wrote in front of her name "Marie Louise"; no one could turn that into "Suker," and so he insisted upon seeing or being given the book, now overdue, of Mr. Suker de Lespenasse. The maid laughed "You want to see Suker; then you shall," and she brought out the daintiest of French poodles, just from his bath, and said to the indignant messenger: "Suker is clever, yes; but I knew not that he read: I will get the book for the poor Irishman who calls to save Suker the trouble to return his book."

Reading matter is not by any means the only thing the public wants the library to supply. If a woman comes in and asks for "Dag's Work," don't be too sure she is a devotee of Kipling; rather look her over and decide from her appearance whether she is looking for a scrubwoman to clean her flat or is herself seeking such a job. We have constant requests for servants, constant requests for aid in securing positions.

One morning not long ago I was called to the phone to be asked how to word a telegram of congratulation to be sent to a bride and groom. Less than ten minutes later some one wanted to know how to pronounce "g-e-n-r-e," a most difficult combination of sounds to send over the phone. The same day a young man came in to get me to suggest some gift that he might send to his employer who was ill, and he added he would like for me to write a little note to go along with his offering; "a note simple and grateful, but to sound like a man wrote it."

The next request was from the entertainment committee of a well-known club. They wanted us to supply an Italian who could dance the Tarantella—the reason that they applied to the library was that they felt that we could produce "the real thing." An agency would probably give them "a dark-eyed Hobokenite, who learned to dance in a Harlem flat," while we, they were sure, had "a real Sicilian."

The attitude of the general reader is well illustrated by a young woman who wanted a book with the stories of the operas, and when told that it was not in said to the busy librarian, "Well, I'm going to see Tannhäuser to-night, and I haven't the vaguest idea what it's about; surely you can tell me the story if you can't find me the book."

Much is said and written in the library circles about the missionary spirit, and undoubtedly the librarian has a large field. If her work chances to be in a foreign section of the city her opportunity to push the spoon about in the Melting Pot becomes almost spectacular. Nevertheless, she meets with discouragements, often at the very point where she is congratulating herself that she is doing most good. The following letter is an instance.

"Dear Sir: Oblige me by not giving Sarah Rothenstab any more books to read because she is near off her mind by the

library. Since you give her books she works no more nor sleeps no more, but she dreams. Her mother is a hard-working woman. Her father is a longshoreman. Save Sarah. She calls herself 'Birdle' since she live by the library. If she keeps on reading the books she will go crazy and curl her hair, but not work. She is Sarah, not Birdle. Please oblige her. MOTHER.

— Division Street."

One of the most interesting cases that I have met in my work was that of a young Jew, who at the age of 22 had never read a novel, nor, indeed, anything except what he got in his school course in Russia. He was willing to promise not to read anything for one year except the books that I gave him—and I think he kept his promise. I was quite keen to see what the effect of the best books would be on his really good mind. At the end of the year I gave him a silly, badly-written novel. He came back in a few hours in high glee to tell me that "this fine book" was the best of all. Shades of Balzac and Tolstoy! I gave him up.

Another man, this time a middle-aged American, wanted us to select his reading for one year, as at the end of that time he expected to be totally blind. His malady was not of the eyes, but would produce blindness along with paralysis of other organs at a certain stage of its development. He told us frankly that he had never read anything but trash. Now that for years he would be dependent on memories, he wanted to store his mind with the treasures of the literary world. We selected for him the great classics, and he grew to love them. At the end of the year he was better, not blind, nor near it, but he could not read anything that satisfied the person of average intelligence. He must have the best, and I grew to dread the sight of him. The great books of the world are so few!

A well-dressed young woman of seeming intelligence wanted "The Bitter Cry" and refused to be comforted with anything else, even the "The Bitter Cry of the Children." "The Bitter Cry" she wanted, and must have. I told her I was sure there was no such book. She asked me rather sarcastically if I had ever heard of "Red Pottage." I assured her that I had.

"Well, 'The Bitter Cry' is the sequel to it."

I ventured to remark that no sequel had ever been written to "Red Pottage." She rushed off to the shelves and returned in a moment, pointing triumphantly to the title page of "Red Pottage," where in small letters is printed beneath the title and author: "After Red Pottage comes the exceeding bitter cry."

And so they come and go, good-natured, cross, stupid, or bright! Ever changing, yet ever the same—the Reading Public.