


The

READING PUBLIC

MACGREGOR, JENKINS

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BY
MACGREGOR JENKINS



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TO
BLISS PERRY
ABLE EDITOR, ACCOMPLISHED WRITER
KNOWER AND LOVER OF THE
MAN IN THE STREET

THE READING PUBLIC

IN the first place let it be understood that I am not a man of letters. Just what relation I bear to the literary activities of my associates it would be hard to say. As nearly as I can diagnose the situation I represent to them, with more or less accuracy, the "average" reader of books and magazines. I seem to stand in their minds for that nebulous personage, "the man in the street." For this reason a doubtful manuscript, an untried author, or new editorial policy is tried on me. I am, in fact, the literary dog of the office.

This exalted position is not without its compensations. It enables me to speak freely as one without authority.

THE READING PUBLIC

I am an utterly irresponsible person; consequently I can give free rein to valueless opinions with the cheerful assurance that no one will attach any importance to them.

What I say, then, about the making and reading of books and magazines must be regarded as nothing more than the random reflections of "the man in the street," and it is from this standpoint that I discuss the august body of people known as the "reading public."

This group of people constitute an interesting phenomenon, but they are more than that. From the point of view of the publisher and the author, they are the ultimate consumer. The lot of the ultimate consumer for the most part is not a happy one, but in this one connection, at least, his con-

THE READING PUBLIC

dition is not desperate. He can stop buying books and magazines; that is, he can theoretically; some of us cannot, some of us are as helpless to pass a bookstore as the most besotted drunkard is to veer from the swinging doors of his favorite saloon. But there is no question that most of us could give up buying half the books we buy if we made what the social workers call "an earnest effort for self-betterment."

To this end we are being helped by the soaring prices of the things we have to buy, and right here comes in one of the interesting things about the reading public. For as the necessity not to buy books increases, the author and publisher redouble their blandishments to keep us in line.

So the reading public, unlike the

THE READING PUBLIC

beef, shoe, flour, and clothes-buying public, is a petted and pampered darling, and is lured to the satisfaction of its desires by all the charms and graces known to the ingenuity of scientific salesmanship, and is not abandoned to the curt take-it-or-leave-it attitude of the Beef Trust.

This reading public is composed of many varieties of readers of widely differing tastes, but in general they can be divided into two pretty clearly defined groups, — those who purchase and read books, and a vastly larger group who confine their literary activities to the consumption of magazines. For the orderly discussion of our subject let us treat the two groups separately.

Yielding once more to the scientific impulse, we can divide readers

THE READING PUBLIC

of books into three roughly defined classes that will help us to continue our discussion in an orderly fashion.

They are:—

The Sponge-Reader.

The Sieve-Reader.

The Duck-Back-Reader.

These classes form a pyramid, the apex the sponge-reader, and the base the duck-back-reader—between them the great class of sieve-readers.

The sponge-reader absorbs what he reads. He is not as a rule a gregarious or an attractive person, he is apt to have a little too much information for human nature's daily needs; but he is the stuff that scholars are made of and is the highest type of reader, if reading be regarded as anything but a time-killing operation. This group is small in number, and almost en-

THE READING PUBLIC

tirely ignored by authors and publishers, save the most enlightened, for the sponge-reader reads fewer and better books than his fellows.

The sieve-reader is more catholic in his tastes, and as he absorbs nothing an almost infinite amount of printed matter can pass through his intellectual organism without occasioning distress. His desire to read is abnormal. This desire springs from obscure sources, but its manifestations are obvious. He becomes a walking directory of the titles and authors of hundreds of books, and on a pinch can present a very creditable appearance in literary circles. He loves the shallows and dabbles gracefully in them. He executes marvels of grace and agility on the thinnest of literary ice and comes safe ashore. In the company of sponge-readers he

THE READING PUBLIC

is apt to be quiet and deferential, recognizing that in that course lies his only chance to escape detection, shrewdly guessing that profound silence can often produce the effect of even profounder wisdom. But get him among his inferiors, let him find himself by any chance in company with a group of common or garden duck-back-readers and he is in his glory.

He bristles with facts, with titles, with authors' names. He can rattle off the entire output of a popular author; he retails the gossip from the literary journals, and incidentally alludes to obscure and half-forgotten earlier performances. He thrills, he irritates, he bewilders. He is fond of relating with astonishing fidelity to detail the involved plot of a recent best-seller. I once rode from Worces-

THE READING PUBLIC

ter to Boston with the most pronounced type of this specimen I ever encountered. He happened to choose Mr. Nicholson's "House of a Thousand Candles," and from the shadow of the Worcester Station to his departure into the bleak twilight of the Back Bay he gave me the entire narrative. It was a stupendous feat, and as I left him enveloped in the gloom of that underground chamber of horrors he solved the mystery. "I sell suspenders and read a book a day on the train." It is obvious that the sieve-reader is the darling of the publisher's heart. It is he who keeps the best-sellers selling.

The third and by far the largest group of readers is the base of our pyramid, the old reliable duck-back. Unlike the sponge-reader he does not

THE READING PUBLIC

absorb; unlike the sieve-reader there is no easy access to or egress from his intellectual citadel. In fact his reading has absolutely no effect upon him at all, except to employ his hands to hold his book and his eyes to read the words.

As a rule this type of reader chooses newspapers and magazines; but many read books. I have in mind one of these readers, a very good friend of mine and a man of sense and character. I have studied his reading habits for years on the train, in his house, and at his club. It is simplicity itself. Purchase a paper, fold it conveniently, and begin at the top of the first left-hand column, read to the bottom, and continue at the top of the next. If a particular narrative breaks off at the bottom of the first column

THE READING PUBLIC

and you find yourself referred to column 3, page 6, ignore it. Quietly begin at the top of the second column on something fresh; it will all come out right in the end. You will ultimately get it all and that is what you want.

This method has many advantages. It lends itself to absolute physical and mental rest. It uses up a prodigious amount of time that would otherwise hang heavy on your hands. It is ideal for the commuter; in fact I fancy that the commuting habit is largely responsible for the enormous increase in the ranks of the duck-backs.

They read their magazines and books with the same singleness of purpose and achieve the same results, — a quiet hour of physical repose with no exactions on the brain. A real duck-back remembers nothing

THE READING PUBLIC

that he reads — titles, authors, publishers, mean nothing; but he goes on buying and reading, reading and buying, to the infinite delight and profit of author and publisher alike.

These gentlemen who sit at the literary throttle are keen observers, and they study their market like the sagacious business men that they are. For the duck-back-reader they have contrived an elaborate and smooth working machine known as the subscription book business. They employ armies of canvassers, they print tons of circulars, and make prodigious sales of books which are never read, but which ornament the center-tables and book-shelves in the houses of their self-satisfied owners.

A friend of mine once bought at a large price an elaborate set of books

THE READING PUBLIC

in which he took infinite pride. A year or two after their purchase I happened to be in his library,—that was what the room was called,—and having an idle five minutes, and being attracted by the glitter of the volumes, I ventured to satisfy my curiosity in regard to their contents. I took one from the shelf. I could not open it. It was as firmly sealed as if set with the most elaborate timelock. I put it back and took down another with the same result; still a third with no better success. Then I realized what had happened. In the hasty manufacture of the volumes the gilt edges had been improperly applied, and instead of yielding easily to the opening of the volumes had made a solid coating of glue and gilding powder which made each book as solid as a brick.

THE READING PUBLIC

I heard my host coming and hastily slipped the volume into place. In he came aglow with outdoor exercise and beaming with pride and delight in his home. "Nice books, are n't they?" he said, as he hurried me to his waiting motor. "I tell you a fellow can't get along without books." "Some cannot," I answered evasively.

This type of book-buyer exists the country over, and while they do not betray the most exacting literary taste, their purchases are inspired by an honest desire to adorn their homes and to appear well before their neighbors; and who will say that these motives are not commendable?

I knew a man once who amassed a fortune by studying the needs of the rural duck-back. To be sure, the books he published were not beautiful as

THE READING PUBLIC

works of art, or inspiring as works of literature, but they served their purpose and they certainly never did any harm. Most of his publications were of a semi-religious character, were printed on wood-pulp paper, and ornamented with the cheapest wood-cut illustrations. His genius lay in making just what his public wanted, and his unerring judgment in the choice of titles was little short of wonderful.

He had a book on the press at the time I met him. He explained that he had long confined himself to religious books, but there was an uneasy stirring of the scientific spirit and he felt that it had spread even to his cross-roads customers. So he had anticipated changed conditions and was putting out a scientific book. He called it "The Wonders of Nature."

THE READING PUBLIC

The cover bore a bewildering mixture of volcanoes and rainbows, elephants and boa-constrictors, tigers and birds-of-paradise. The introduction was written by the Professor of Natural Science in a rural academy, and with it the volume was ready to stand the test of changed conditions.

To his amazement the book did not sell. He could hardly persuade himself that he had missed a trick, but the reports of his agents were not to be argued away,— the book did not sell. The truth was that while the cross-roads buyer was beginning to taste the forbidden fruit of scientific thought, he was still far too wise to flaunt his backsliding by putting on his center-table anything except the long-accepted volumes of his fathers.

The canny publisher took counsel

THE READING PUBLIC

with his experience and concluded that like other great men he was ahead of his time. The books were all called in, the covers and introduction removed, and when they reappeared they bore the same resplendent confusion of flora and fauna on the cover, but no longer was the title "The Wonders of Nature"; it was now, in its changed and chastened condition, "The Architecture of God." The preface, so elaborately prepared by the budding scientist, was gone and in its place appeared another by the Reverend Mr. Blank, of Bucksport, Maine!

There was no trouble with sales now. The book was bought by thousands and all went merry as a wedding bell. The duck-back-reader had stood to his guns and won a famous victory.

For the most part, however, the

THE READING PUBLIC

sponge-reader alone, of the three classes of readers we are discussing, has much to say as to what literary provender is provided for him. The sponge-reader has less to fear than his brothers from the makers and writers of worthless books, for he does decide in a measure what he will and what he will not read, and it is to him that the author of honest work must look for an audience.

I once had charge of the stock room of a large publishing house, and it was interesting to watch the piles of books dwindle. The progress of a real reader from bookstore to bookstore could be noted.

I grew to have a real affection for the neglected books. The little piles seemed to shrink into the corners of the bins as if ashamed and a bit lonely.

THE READING PUBLIC

The fives and the tens looked so pitiful beside the thousands—great heaps of good sellers resplendent in crimson and gold.

I remember one little pile of slender brown volumes which I never disturbed. I knew nothing of the author except that he wrote verse, and this little book was his literary output. His gentle life had long since closed. Few recalled him and fewer knew his book. One day a miracle happened. I was told to deliver one copy of this little book to a local bookstore. A half-hour passed and another was ordered for a second dealer. Later still a third little volume rose up, and shaking the dust from its cover went out into the wide world. I guessed the truth. There was no great revival of interest in this gentle singer. It was only a sponge-

THE READING PUBLIC

reader making his toilsome way from shop to shop trying to find a book he really wanted.

The sponge-reader is known in the book trade as a man of independent notions in regard to the books he will or will not read.

The sieve-reader is the creature of the publisher and commercial author. He may flatter himself he has literary taste, but he has not. His reading is decided for him. He makes the "best sellers," for he buys what he is told to buy, and while he affects tremendous erudition he really is the publisher's plaything. In fact he was brought into being by the publisher. The process is very simple. He is provided with books which make reading the easiest thing in the world. Then reading is made fashionable to the same degree

THE READING PUBLIC

that phonographs and lodge memberships are. His love of gossip and intimate nothings is created and pandered to by the so-called "literary" papers. His taste is not exacting, it is easy to provide him with what he wants.

There are countless stories told of the genesis of best-sellers: many, no doubt, quite without foundation in fact; but enough is known to show that many of them were the result of a painstaking effort by author and publisher to provide the sieve-reader with the easiest possible reading.

There is one story to the effect that a wager was made between two men that one of them could produce a best-seller in a stipulated period of time. This he did by carefully analyzing a dozen or more such books and finding out just how they were put

THE READING PUBLIC

together. So enamored of the game did he become that he produced half a dozen.

These various yarns must be accepted, however, with a bit of salt, but it is quite evident that a good many very popular books of late years have been written more with an eye to meeting popular demand than to the production of a really good piece of work. Witness the countless inferior books which follow in the wake of a successful one. After such a great success, for instance, as "David Harum," the bookstalls were flooded with the type of story soon known in the trade as the "by-gosh story." If the gossip of the bookstores can be believed, one at least of these stories was a machine-made product. A short story by an unsuccessful writer which had been

THE READING PUBLIC

hawked about magazine offices for months was padded out to the proportions of a full-length story. The author worked while the publisher held the stop-watch and the story was produced in the stipulated time.

I recall once making a visit to an inland city where I called upon two friends who for some months had been engaged in the daring attempt to publish really good books in a small way. My arrival was inopportune, as I appeared at their office at just the moment the sheriff was departing with their last chair. There were, however, empty packing-cases, and on these we sat while we discussed the vicissitudes of a publishing career.

There were five of us, the two partners, calm and undisturbed by the disaster which had overtaken them,

THE READING PUBLIC

and two authors who had, perhaps, called in a faint hope that they might secure something on account of long overdue royalties, but who stayed to sympathize and to help. I completed the circle, and being the only member of the party who had any real money I invited my friends to lunch. Warmed by the genial influence of a friendly meal together, the future began to take on a rosier tint. Plans were formulated. I recall at this luncheon that one of the two authors gave expression to a new and interesting theory of literary production. He remarked that in his wanderings about the city he had observed that the largest groups of idlers stood as a rule in front of the stores displaying pictures in their windows, and of two given picture-stores the larger group

THE READING PUBLIC

was invariably in front of the store in which the largest number of pictures of beautiful young women was displayed. From this he justly reasoned that the world was more interested in feminine youth and beauty than anything else. He announced that he was about to return to his humble garret and produce a story governed by this great literary principle. He determined to cast to the winds all notions of probability or possibility and of literary conventions. He proposed to produce a book which would be a whole gallery of alluring pictures of the same radiant young woman.

The second writer, not to be outdone in optimism and cheerfulness, announced his intention to construct either a book or a comic opera from a series of cartoons which he had once

THE READING PUBLIC

drawn and unsuccessfully offered for sale to a number of metropolitan dailies. Both of these men kept their word. The radiant heroine appeared before many months, and for a very considerable time brought her creator handsome royalties. The choice of the second man ultimately was in favor of the comic opera, and this was forthwith produced with enormous success. This was many years ago, but the production is still on the American stage, and I am not at all sure that our children's children will not see it in some modified form.

In these instances one of the productions, at least, was designed along scientific lines to meet the taste of the sieve-reader at the moment.

I once knew a man who had so perfectly gauged the taste of this great

THE READING PUBLIC

class of readers that he used his skill to pay for practically all the luxuries he enjoyed. Having convinced himself that there always had been and always would be an unflinching demand for a certain type of story, my friend addressed himself to the problem of producing them just as rapidly as his professional duties would permit.

The chosen type of story was the well-known "Beautiful-Girl-Mill-Operative and Handsome-Son-of-the-Owner" type. He found that by extreme diligence he could turn out four a year. They were of considerable length, and they were written under a variety of feminine *noms de plume*. He did not concern himself with any questions of copyright or royalty, but having found his market made an out-and-out cash sale of his

THE READING PUBLIC

product and dismissed it from his mind. The proceeds from this literary activity he devoted to frequent trips to New York, during which he and his wife reveled in the theater and the opera and other luxuries bought with his ill-gotten gains.

These men are doing honest work, however, and, while they write for an entirely unintelligent public, they do their public no special harm, and are not to be confounded with the literary fakirs who abound to-day as they always have and always will.

But enough of the sieve-reader and sieve-reading. Board any gorgeously appointed "limited" train, sit in any one of the plush-covered air-tight cars, and look about you. Gaze on your fellow beings employing a few hours of enforced leisure in literary pursuits.

THE READING PUBLIC

Look at the books they are reading, and then raise your eyes to the faces above the books. Do such books make such faces, or do such faces demand such books? I do not know, but I do know that one such experience makes me want to be a Hottentot quite ignorant of the A B C.

I recall that on one such trip I decided to subject myself to the spell of a best-seller vociferously recommended by the newsboy on the train. For over an hour I struggled manfully to interest myself in a machine-made story. Finally I gave it up, and for the only time, I think, in my life I abandoned a half-read book. I left it in my chair to be picked up by some one who had not been unfortunate enough to acquire, quite unconsciously, perhaps, some of the characteristics of a sponge-

THE READING PUBLIC

reader. To this day the incident recurs to me, and I have as guilty a feeling as if I had abandoned a baby in that train.

The duck-back-reader is by far the least picturesque of the three groups, but he has, after all, a certain charm for the sympathetic observer. He is the placid hippopotamus of the literary zoo, munching his food in stolid contentment without an emotion, without a sensation of any kind. But he is honest,—he makes no pretensions, he knows no affectations. Why he reads is a mystery, but read he does, or the publishers would go out of business, that is, many of them would. A few of them really rely on the discriminating reader for their support. It is a wonder that he can be found, for he is a shy bird who has been

THE READING PUBLIC

cheated so often that the lure of the advertisement is lost upon him.

I met a real reader once, and the experience had as far-reaching an effect on my intellectual development as anything that ever happened to me. It was in this wise: I once found myself late at night the sole occupant of the smoking-compartment of a sleeping-car. Presently a man slouched into the compartment and threw himself wearily into the seat opposite me. Being constitutionally unable to remain long in the presence of a fellow being without talking to him, we drifted into conversation, and by some curious chance we spoke of reading. The moment the subject was introduced, my unknown friend became interested. He confided to me that he was a track-inspector whose work called him

THE READING PUBLIC

from home at all hours of the day and night, and consequently he had found little time for literary pursuits. He had confined himself, so he said, to the reading of one author whose books he read over and over again, never wearying of them and always finding in them new interest and inspiration. In answer to my inquiry he told me that this one author was Victor Hugo. "I shall get off at the next station," he said, "and make my way home. I will find a lamp burning in the kitchen, my slippers by the stove, and my book face down on the table where I left it early this morning." For the remaining half-hour of our interview he talked to me of Victor Hugo in a way which convinced me of the wisdom of confining your reading to one author, provided, of course, he be big enough.

THE READING PUBLIC

That incident taught me a great deal. It taught me that the most deadly and dangerous thing in the world is intellectual insincerity. It is bad enough to be insincere with other people, but to try to cheat yourself is both stupid and immoral.

Real reading is a mighty serious matter, but it can be made interesting and inspiring. Think for a moment what life would be if no one of us could read, and then think for a moment how most of us employ the God-given gift of communion with other minds through the printed page. I think if we tabulated the results of our last year's reading it would not make an impressive showing.

Do not misunderstand me. I make no plea for the "high-brow" book because it is "high-brow." I hold no

THE READING PUBLIC

brief for the dull and pedantic. I only ask that I get something more out of reading than physical rest or the mild tickling of my intellectual palate.

A farmer told me once he liked a certain book because there was something "into it." What does it mean? Such a book is the Book of Job. Such a book is "Alice in Wonderland." The book that lasts has something "into it."

Most of us who have much to do with the making or selling or reading of books acquire a very superior attitude of mind toward the books loved and read by persons a little less sophisticated than ourselves. It is the easiest thing in the world to brand as inferior a book which may not happen to appeal to us, but which has held a great audience through many years of

THE READING PUBLIC

changing literary fashions. But, after all, a book which persists and retains in every generation its hold upon a large number of readers must have inherently great qualities.

There are hundreds of such books being read to tatters in our public libraries which are practically unknown in what are, perhaps erroneously, called more "cultivated circles."

I recall being asked once by a little serving-maid in my home if she might have access to my limited library. Scenting an opportunity for literary experimentation, I gladly gave permission, though I am free to confess that the library contained a number of volumes designed for readers of somewhat more mature mind. I did not feel that she could come to any harm, because I was positive that the vol-

THE READING PUBLIC

umes which she would better not read she would not find interesting. For several days I watched her tentative nibblings at unfamiliar fruit, noticed this or that modern novel taken away, only to be replaced within a few hours. Finally, one day I passed through the room where she was seated and my attention was attracted by muffled sobs. Glancing over her shoulder as I passed, I was amused to see that she was huddled in her chair crying her heart out and having a perfectly lovely time reading "Queechy."

I have no doubt that few, if any, of that extremely small portion of the reading public whose eye will ever fall upon this page have ever read this book. If so, they have probably read it only to scorn it; yet it is a book that always has kept its place, and it

THE READING PUBLIC

must be that it possesses some real quality to have been the final selection of this roving, inquisitive little mind.

It is very easy to classify the readers of books, but like all generalizations such a classification is only half true. There are a great many people of sense who have bad reading habits, and no one to correct them now that the day of real literary criticism has past. If all the people who have literary taste would exercise it, the ranks of the sponge-reader would increase enormously.

There always will be the unworthy book, just as there always will be debased forms of expression in every art, but why people of sense should encourage them is a mystery.

There has been, since man began

THE READING PUBLIC

to reason, a question unsettled and still open to debate, "Which came first, the first hen or the first egg?" So there is the question, "Do books make readers' appetites, or do appetites for special types of books create those types?"

Let us look back a little. Some of us remember "Queechy." All of us remember the melting heroine.

Then came the romantic novel. Then came the historical novel. These were followed by the political novel. Now we are wading through a swamp of financial and political stories with a mixture of bloodshed and twentieth-century swashbuckling.

One day I found myself seated in a train beside a friend of mine who is a confirmed sieve-reader. After we had exchanged a few commonplaces

THE READING PUBLIC

on business and the weather, I retired behind my evening paper. My friend drew from his pocket a copy of his favorite periodical. Before he opened it, I said, "Wait a minute, let me see if I cannot tell you exactly what you are going to find in this week's issue. Just what the stories will be called, I do not know, but I can name with considerable accuracy the illustrations which will accompany them. You will find at least four illustrations in which a man or a woman will be flourishing a revolver. You will find two illustrations in which a stock-ticker will figure. There will be, at least, two groups of struggling Chinamen on the slanting deck of a sailing-vessel. There will be an indefinite number of illustrations depicting very long girls and longer noblemen."

THE READING PUBLIC

We opened the paper and found that my prophecy was in the main correct. I had overestimated the week's production of revolvers, as there were only three, but the stock-tickers and the girls and the noblemen were there. The only inaccuracy was that the struggling figures on the vessel's deck this week proved to be of Latin extraction rather than Asiatic.

This is the provender which is being provided for the sieve-reader. Not that he likes it particularly, but he is being educated in the belief that he is a robust, virile, "red-blooded" creature, and to this end is being assiduously supplied with stories of speculation, murder, and court intrigue. As a matter of fact, he does not care a fig for any of these things, but, being a perfectly obliging person, he permits

THE READING PUBLIC

the publishers to provide for him what is most convenient at the moment.

I have spoken of a story written on a wager. I have spoken of a story written around "a radiant heroine"; but that is not the whole of the picture. With all their weaknesses and vanities there are a lot of sincere men and women writing to-day. They are trying, among other things, to interpret life, to bring about reforms, and to show some of our national weaknesses. Many of them fail because they are dull, untruthful, or pedantic. But a goodly number succeed because they make an honest and direct appeal to the real fundamental humanity in their readers.

It seems to me to be important for any person of intelligence to consider what his attitude should be toward

THE READING PUBLIC

literature. I do not mean by literature so-called "high-brow stuff," pedantic preaching, and books about books or about men who wrote books. Nor do I mean the endless discussion of the intricacies of literary art. I would not have the remotest interest in a six-hundred page volume on *ut* with the ablative in Plautus. This to my humble way of thinking is not literature; it is chemistry or higher mathematics.

I mean by literature, at least I think I mean, that it is after all only a form of expression, an interpretation of the phenomena of human existence, the painting of pictures of life. History, biography, romance, poetry, and humor all do this. The trick is to know which is which. I know of no way better than to go back to the old

THE READING PUBLIC

definition and cling to the book with "something into it."

I think every intelligent person ought to elect himself into one of the three classes we have been discussing. If he be a duck-back, let him remain so if he must. If he be a sieve, let him try to be as inoffensive a sieve as possible. If he really gets something out of his reading, let him rejoice and give thanks.

What should we expect to get from our reading? I am enough of a Philistine to believe that the least important thing to strive for is instruction. The accumulation of facts seems to me an extraordinary waste of time when life is so short and there is so much that is more worth while. Why not try to have our reading give us a little more human sympathy for our

THE READING PUBLIC

fellow beings, a little wider horizon to our own little life, a little more love for the other fellow, and incidentally as much amusement as we can derive from it?

We are all engaged in the interesting experience of living, wise and foolish alike, and it would seem that each of us could sustain a much more normal relation to life if we acquired an ever so shadowy historical background, some general knowledge of present conditions, and possibly some faint idealism. There is no doubt that the joy of living would be enormously increased if we read wisely.

It may seem very presuming for a layman to attempt to prescribe for present-day literary ills, but I am tempted to do so.

In the first place, in this connection,

THE READING PUBLIC

if I were a woman, I should demand among other rights the return of my literary heritage. The women buy ten books to-day where the men buy one. I should repudiate in no uncertain voice the kind of thing that is provided for my special benefit. I should demand emancipation from the so-called women's publications, with all their tawdry make-believe and literary cant, with all their pretty little literary paper dolls and their pseudo-scientific nonsense. I should realize that all this stuff with its sickening sentiment and doubtful sex-consciousness is vastly more dangerous to our daughter's mental and moral integrity than many robust writers from whom she is shielded. Having secured my freedom, as many have, I should use it to get the very best out of life.

THE READING PUBLIC

At the best we can only touch life physically at a very few points. All other contact must come through good talk and good reading. We choose our friends, why not our books.

Looking on life, after all, in its final analysis as a purely social affair,— I mean purely a question of our relation to our fellow beings, and a right adjustment of our conflicting claims,— I should put first in importance a sympathetic understanding of my fellow men. History, biography, personal reminiscence, and some fiction will help us do this. Never mind the dates, never mind who fought or won or lost the Punic Wars (I am sure I have not the faintest idea), but hold fast to the truth that our problems are not new problems; they are as old as man. Even the Phœnicians struggled with

THE READING PUBLIC

the high cost of living. History read in this spirit has enormous rewards in interest and humor. Fiction can help you know a little about life of to-day, but be sure that it deals with a phase of life that has real significance and is not the highly colored imaginings of some social parasite.

Of poetry each must judge for himself. But as man does not live by bread alone, so the mind needs some idealism, and poetry ought to give it. Read it if you can, but for Heaven's sake, do not pretend to like it if you do not.

And humor; above all, let us not forget humor. It is the salt of life; it is the one thing that keeps us sane. Don the cap and bells at pleasure and refresh your souls. We can learn a great deal in very pleasant fashion from the jesters. They are the only

THE READING PUBLIC

people who really prick the bubbles of our vanity in a pleasant and painless fashion. You can get an amazing amount of history out of Trollope and Mark Twain, philosophy from Lewis Carroll, and politics from the incomparable Dooley; and I know no literary criticism equal to some of J. K. Stephen's estimates of writers, he who wrote the famous

“When the Ruddyards cease from Kipling
And the Haggards ride no more”;

or —

“Two voices are there : one is of the deep ; . . .
And one is of an old half-witted sheep
Which bleats articulate monotony, . . .
And, Wordsworth, both are thine,” etc.

When we think of the tons of inferior books which we, the reading public, devour year in and year out, it would seem as if we were in a rather

THE READING PUBLIC

bad way. But let us not despair. We are not utterly unregenerate and lost. We, like every other mass of human beings, have a substratum of surprisingly sound common sense. We do like good things,— witness the avidity with which we buy the good, the wholesome, the sweet and unaffected. What mountains of “ Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch ” and “ The Birds’ Christmas Carol ” and “ The Lady of the Decoration ” we have purchased. Only we do not stand by our guns like the duck-back. We run after strange gods and infinitely stranger goddesses. We tolerate, if we do not worship, the Mary McLeans, the Baroness This or That, the — but I promised to name no names.

If we stand up in our boots and say, “ We, the reading public, in conven-

THE READING PUBLIC

tion assembled, do hereby demand our inalienable right to the best in letters," we shall get it, and not only shall we profit enormously, but we shall be called blessed even to the third and fourth generation.

And it would seem as if this happy day were really coming; for with all their defects the magazines are educating a lot of people in the art of reading, and a few of them will ultimately crave better and better literary provender, and so the ranks of the real readers will be slowly and painfully recruited.

But in the mean time the sieve and the duck-back are coming into their own more than ever before. Not content to allow them to remain the private prey of the commercial book publisher, the magazines have made a

THE READING PUBLIC

frantic and fairly successful effort to prevent their development into real readers. This has been accomplished in various ways. In the first place, the numerical strength of the reading public has been vastly increased until now nearly every human being with eyes to see reads at least one magazine, and frequently a dozen. This newly created reader is kept as much as possible in ignorance of better things, and then, lest he feebly try to free himself from the shackles of the "popular," he is told that "popularity" is the final test of excellence. He is solemnly informed that muck-raking makes for good citizenship, that the sensational is the virile, and often that the obscene is in its final analysis educational. So he is frequently content to remain where he is and to wallow in the pop-

THE READING PUBLIC

ular under the impression that what makes his reading so easy really educates and uplifts.

This enormous number of people, either kept in intellectual bondage by such specious arguments, or blindly rebelling and groping their way to better things, is the really significant element in the intellectual life of our country to-day.

The hope of the future is the one-hundredth man who emerges. And emerge he does, for never before have good books and magazines been sought as now.

It may be interesting to study this spectacle from the viewpoint of the magazine publisher, even if our deductions must of necessity be based on the happenings in one magazine office.

THE READING PUBLIC

In my perusals of many learned manuscripts I have frequently been struck with the free use of statistics by writers of all degrees of prominence. The secret seems to be that their use always lends an air of profundity to their utterances, and they are also the most easily procurable things in the world. Let us by all means begin with some.

How many magazine readers, I wonder, realize the number of periodicals poured out annually upon the American reading public? There are over three thousand monthly publications in this country, and over fifteen thousand publications of all kinds. Cheering figures to paper manufacturers and to authors, but forbidding to any one who contemplates starting a new periodical venture.

THE READING PUBLIC

Of this vast number, however, there are comparatively few of general interest. A scant dozen would cover the monthly periodicals familiar to most magazine readers. This dozen can again be divided into two groups about equal in size, one representing the periodicals published with some serious purpose in view, and the other those which are conducted purely as money-making ventures.

Strange as it may seem, there are some periodicals of general circulation whose publishers care more for the service they can render to American life and literature than for the profits they make.

I once asked the owner of a very flourishing popular magazine, who was editing his periodical. He answered with evident pride, "I have no editor.

THE READING PUBLIC

My magazine is a business proposition." Unfortunately I can speak only of magazines which have editors.

There is a good deal said about the "editorial policy" of various magazines, and each of them has a distinct character of its own, but it is doubtful if a single magazine published to-day has any very definite editorial policy.

Any publication in course of time builds up traditions of its own, and finds its own particular field; but few, if any, are conducted by rule-of-thumb methods. In the old days Robert Bonner had a few simple rules for the editorial conduct of the "New York Ledger." No horse could trot under three minutes; no character ever smoked or drank, much less swore; divorce was never mentioned;

THE READING PUBLIC

and the curtain always fell on romances before the lovers exchanged a single kiss.

The application of somewhat similar rules might benefit current literature not a little, but I doubt if even in the conduct of the most exquisitely edited women's publications there are any hard-and-fast rules.

No, the magazines that have survived the fearful competition of the last ten years have done so by the simple process of remaining in the field which they have preëmpted and by having in the editorial chair a man who can find in that field fresh and inviting material for his readers. Despite the magazines that are "business propositions," this brings us to the very evident fact that the editor is the most important element in the success

THE READING PUBLIC

of a magazine, — really everything depends upon him. There is really such a thing as “editorial instinct.” It is not, however, exactly what a young man of my acquaintance thought it was.

This young man had recently become the editor of a very successful woman’s publication. On the occasion of my first visit to him, I was conducted through a labyrinth of outer offices resplendent with Grand Rapids furniture, plaster casts, and rubber plants, and ushered into his presence. He greeted me with that curious combination of cordiality and condescension with which a New York business man always greets a visitor from Boston, and we talked of many things. My attention was attracted by a pile of small pasteboard boxes on the top

THE READING PUBLIC

of his desk, and I made bold to inquire as to their contents. "Those," he said, — "oh, those are the doilies submitted in our last needlework contest." Here truly was something new under the editorial sun, and I am afraid I betrayed my surprise.

"But surely," I said, "you don't decide the needlework contests." He looked a bit pained. "Of course I do," he responded; "and the curious thing about it is that when I finally reach a decision my wife often says, 'My dear, how do you do it? How do you manage always to select the best and prettiest ones, for you always do?' And I answer, 'I'm sure I don't know, my love, but I fancy it is the editorial instinct.'"

Now, while discriminating taste in doilies is important, it is not the elu-

THE READING PUBLIC

sive thing we call "editorial instinct." To me this "editorial instinct" seems to be the power to detect at a glance the significant things in life and in letters and in society; then to know intuitively how they should be presented to make one's readers listen; and then, the most difficult of all, to put one's finger on the man or woman to do the work.

There are some subjects which are always in the public mind, just as there are some figures in history, the interest in which ebbs and flows as regularly as the seasons come and go. Of these Lincoln, Napoleon, and Luther are conspicuous examples. These three gentlemen, whatever their usefulness in the past may have been, are now recognized as "circulation raisers" of the first order. There are other

THE READING PUBLIC

subjects of perennial interest, however.

In this country it is a poor day that does not bring to every editorial desk from Maine to California a paper on the negro problem. Now the "Atlantic Monthly" has done its share for the colored brother, particularly under the editorship of Mr. Walter H. Page, a Southerner by birth and education. One day a colored man of cultivation was talking with Mr. Page, urging the publication of a series of conventional papers on the subject. Mr. Page knew he had printed as much of this material as was wise, he knew more of the same sort would weary his readers and do more harm than good, yet the question is a big and pressing one. Could it be approached from some fresh point of view? He was pacing

THE READING PUBLIC

back and forth in his little office while the eloquent negro talked. Suddenly he stopped and said, "No, I won't print another line of the material you are talking about, but I tell you what I will do. You tell me 'how it feels to be a negro' and I'll print it."

That was editorial instinct.

Most of the really successful magazine papers, the ones that seem most spontaneous and incidentally sell the best, are the result of some such flashing realization on the part of an editor that a really vital subject can be approached from some fresh point of view. Such men, then, the editors of magazines must be, and American magazines have been fortunate in having a number of them.

Perhaps the most complex and most interesting feature of magazine work

THE READING PUBLIC

is the relation of a publication to its authors. Of this it is well to speak in guarded terms, for almost every human being in the world is either an author or likely to become one at any moment.

The most popular superstition in regard to editors is that they do not give consideration to the work of new and unknown writers. This notion persists in the public mind for the same mysterious reasons that cause generations of small boys to believe that toads give warts, or that snakes swallow their tails. If authors only realized the eagerness with which the work of unknown writers is scanned, they would soon see the folly of any such idea.

There is no mystery about it. A new and untried author demands and

THE READING PUBLIC

receives, as a rule, a lower rate of payment than those of established reputation, and rightly so. But more than this, — they are vastly more amenable to suggestion. They have no fixed habits of thought, less marked characteristics of style, and can be moulded to meet the needs of an editor much more freely than their more well-known brothers.

But they ask, “What of all these rejections?” One reason for them is the limited possibility of choice. The average magazine prints about twelve body articles a month. That means that one hundred and forty-four papers supply the needs of the magazine for a year. The accumulation of a large number of manuscripts is unwise, as long-deferred publication always detracts from their freshness, and the

THE READING PUBLIC

necessity of printing material already accepted deters an editor from buying what may be better and fresher.

So the skillful editor sails pretty close to the wind. He buys only what he can publish with reasonable promptness, and while he always will have enough material to tide him over one of the rare periods of unproductiveness on the part of authors, he must always be free to make immediate purchases of the unexpected windfalls which come to every office.

This accounts for many rejections, and for the non-committal form of rejection. These courteous phrases familiar to so many of us are really the children of necessity. Disgruntled authors to the contrary notwithstanding, acceptable manuscripts are constantly being rejected, for precisely

THE READING PUBLIC

the reasons given, by long-suffering editors. These rejected manuscripts often cover precisely the same ground as others already on hand, they are strikingly similar in plot and setting, or are written in the same period. Stories, particularly, drop into groups in the editorial mind—sea stories, horse and dog stories, New England, Western, child, school and college, slum and settlement work, business—there are countless classifications.

Now if a story chances to drop into one of the familiar groups it must be distinctly better than those already on hand if it is to gain acceptance, and there is a surprising amount of literary work of about the same degree of excellence.

Editors are human, and it is no wonder that after reading three stories of

THE READING PUBLIC

the Maine woods an editor wearies a little when the next manuscript in the pile proves a fourth story with the same background. It may be thoroughly good, but its chances of acceptance are slight. But let a new writer submit a manuscript original in subject and treatment, and see what happens. The editor, if he is really an editor and not a mere adjunct to an advertising sheet, will do his utmost to accept it. If it is not in proper form he will sit up nights to smooth it into shape. Authors will not believe this, but it is true.

Authors object to printed rejection slips. The printer will tell you they are ordered by the thousands. Enough clerks could not be hired or housed to do the work they do. "Well," the rejected say, "give us printed ones, but

THE READING PUBLIC

let them tell the truth." Now the fact of the case is that an editor often does not dare tell the truth. His lot is hard enough as it is; he does not court assassination. Now let us be reasonable for a moment. Are all the people you know agreeable, wise and cultured, witty, engaging, and prepossessing? Not unless you live in the islands of the blessed. By the same token do all the people who send manuscripts to an editor betray the same agreeable characteristic? Far from it.

Writing is a serious business. Would that the budding author realized it! It is, after all, self-revelation. Let two men describe an incident, a chance meeting on the street, or what not. One will tell you a dull tale; the other will leave you chuckling for an hour. Both stories would be competent testi-

THE READING PUBLIC

mony in a court of law. Both stories might well meet the bare technical requirements of narrative, but one is a good yarn and the other is not. Both would be regarded as available by the authors and their families, but one reveals an agreeable personality and the other does not. This in varying degrees solves the mystery of editorial "availability"; at least it seems to me to do so from the standpoint of the man in the street.

What would the author prefer? The agreeable evasiveness of a printed slip, or a letter saying, "Sir, — Looking through your manuscript I see in the person behind it an insufferable bore." Or, "Madam, — Your manuscript, entirely acceptable as far as technical requirements are concerned, reveals so vapid a personality behind it that we

THE READING PUBLIC

cannot believe our readers will care to make your acquaintance."

Now I am going to use a word I hate, but I know no other to fit. That is the word "taste." I have read in my capacity as a literary dog hundreds of manuscripts which were so good I wondered why they were not better. Slowly it dawned on me that the authors in many instances knew the craftsmanship of their trade, but they were deficient in that subtle thing we call "taste." I recall one story in which, to create an atmosphere of superlative luxury around the heroine, she, poor girl, was compelled by the heartless author of her being to step in and out of a limousine fourteen times in the narrow compass of a four-thousand-word story. A man or woman who talked like that would be laughed at.

THE READING PUBLIC

As a writer he wonders why his stories do not succeed.

The man in the street could tell him. One does not need the editorial gift to know he is a cad. So, after all, I am convinced that all the fine phrases that my literary associates use, technique, mood, restraint, and all the rest, come to the same thing after all. It is the personality back of the manuscript that often makes for acceptance or rejection.

Let writers write less, read more, live wisely, deeply, and humanly, — make themselves, in other words, good fellows, and with reasonable technical skill their chance is good of being a best-seller.

Editors are often charged with being influenced by distinguished names. It is claimed that they publish inferior

THE READING PUBLIC

work by famous writers to the exclusion of better work by unknowns. Guilty in the first degree. No other verdict is possible from a jury of unprejudiced magazine readers. But the real answer to this charge is that the men who are guilty of it are not editors. They are hired choremen doing the work their employer sets them to.

This is no place to discuss the editorial function, but it is well to bear in mind this question: Is this editorial function an honest effort to aim at and hit as often as possible a fixed target of excellence, or a frantic effort to shoot as rapidly as possible at the moving target of public taste? If it is the former, then few, if any, real editors are guilty of this charge of subservency to a famous name. If the latter, then they are only doing their duty,

THE READING PUBLIC

for the public demands stories good, bad, and indifferent from writers of note.

The fact that a famous author sells to the same editors the identical manuscripts they curtly declined when the author was unknown proves nothing except that the editors are giving the public exactly what they want. The stories may have been inferior when first offered and declined, and they may have been no less so when the same editors bought them a year later under the pressure of public demand. So the editor turns over his pile of manuscripts in his search after either the good or the popular.

These manuscripts come in shoals from every quarter of the globe. There are somewhere between ten and twelve thousand handled every year in the

THE READING PUBLIC

“Atlantic” office, from which a selection of a scant two hundred and fifty is made. They run the whole gamut of human interest and experience. There are quatrains and two-volume novels, and the most remarkable thing about them is that they are all read, except that hopeless, pathetic minority that bear the familiar earmarks of insanity.

A considerable portion of the inhabitants of this country are still attempting to square the circle, explain the pyramids, or invent perpetual motion. Some of these contributors of crank literature are amusing, some alarming. I recall one fearsome person, seven feet high, more or less, with bristling whiskers and flashing eyes, whose manuscript was an exhaustive study of the interesting thesis that

THE READING PUBLIC

Abraham Lincoln was a reincarnation of St. Paul. Through an inaccurate address, or on account of the migratory habits of the author, the manuscript never reached him after an entirely unjust and prejudiced editorial judgment had been made against it. The author afterwards recognized his brain child in a publication of the Smithsonian Institution. It did not matter that the monograph in question happened to discuss the watershed of the Missouri Valley; it was his and he knew it. He hurried to our office and charged us with the nefarious crime of having sold his manuscript to what he described as "the vermin of the White House." We were given our choice, ten thousand dollars cash, or we were to be blown up! How little he knew of the maga-

THE READING PUBLIC

zine business! Any magazine publisher would welcome complete and painless annihilation when faced by the alternative of finding ten thousand dollars.

For weeks we came to and departed from our office with furtive glances up and down the street. For a month our sensitive nostrils detected daily the odor of a burning fuse.

Editors and publishers frequently have a rule that contributors are not to read their compositions aloud to them. One day I received a call from a gentleman who announced on his arrival, "I come not to sell my wares, I come for human sympathy." So unusual an introduction enlisted my interest at once. Before I could stop him he had his manuscript out and was well under way. He read me a

THE READING PUBLIC

poem of some forty stanzas, each one ending with the eloquent and suggestive monosyllables, "Ho, Ho, Ha, Ha." It was an extraordinary elocutionary feat, for he gave to those monosyllables forty different inflections. With no offer of barter he thanked me for my wealth of human sympathy and withdrew.

Some authors are timid about submitting their manuscripts; some want payment in advance of examination; some inquire the price paid for "good poetry"; some are trustful and send a sample, like the gentleman from Indiana, that home of poesy, who sent four verses and wanted to know what we would pay for them and for forty-two "extry fine stanzas."

Some transpose a couple of pages in the middle of the manuscript and

THE READING PUBLIC

write back in glee when the manuscript is returned with the pages still out of order, proving beyond doubt that the deceitful editor never read it. The writers who resort to this well-known trick usually submit manuscripts the value of which would not be greatly affected by the transposition of a considerable number of pages.

I do not want to dwell too long on this element of magazine work, but, after all, the rejected manuscripts and their authors bring to an editorial office not a little humor and relief from more serious duties. These offerings are vastly interesting. Often I suspect that they are submitted by some wag with whom it would be a pleasure to foregather.

Between the specialist whose work

THE READING PUBLIC

is always in demand, and the writer of habitually declined manuscripts, there is, however, a large group of writers who challenge every editor's attention. And it is with this group that most of his work is done, and upon his relations with them depends largely his editorial success or failure. This is the great group of occasional writers, some writing from the fullness of a life's experience, some making their first attempts, some writing for the sheer pleasure of self-expression, and other from stern necessity.

It is with this group that a skillful editor most concerns himself, for among the hundreds there may be found the one bright particular star that may guide his magazine on to success, the one writer who may give expression to half-formed editorial

THE READING PUBLIC

plans and perform the service he has so long waited to see performed.

And in passing, it is pleasant to note that where an author has been helped and encouraged, when he or she has, perhaps, been guided away from mistaken standards and started toward success by some editor, I have yet to know an instance where such glory and reputation as was gained did not fall entirely to the lot of the author. I have never heard an editor, publicly, at least, claim an iota of credit for any author's distinction, and if the truth were known, there are dozens of conspicuous instances where unknown editors have actually made authors who to-day enjoy world-wide reputation. Perhaps it is because years of labor full of disappointments and unfulfilled hopes keep an editor hum-

THE READING PUBLIC

ble. Perhaps it is that he knows only too well his own liability to error. Whether these things have burned into the editorial mind or not, I do not know, but I do know that the best editors are the humblest and least likely to boast of their successes.

Of this group of occasional writers the most interesting and the most vexatious are what are called the "one-story writers." How faithfully an editor tries to develop such a person, how he warns against overproduction, and counsels reading and study. Once in a great while, once in a very great while, his advice is followed, and the writer profits by it; but more often it is not and rejection follows rejection.

The "one-story writers" are an interesting problem. They are hard to explain, but I will venture to give

THE READING PUBLIC

what seems a reasonable explanation of them.

I believe that almost every person of cultivation has somewhere in the recesses of his consciousness some pet idea or the recollections of some peculiarly vivid experience. It has been moulded by unconscious thought into some literary form, a story, an essay, a poem, or what not. Then comes the impulse to write, to express this thought, and it leaps on to paper in more or less perfect form.

Its form depends upon how much natural gift for literary expression the writer may have. Often it is thoroughly good and has the essential literary qualities, sincerity and lack of self-consciousness. It gains acceptance and the bewildered writer finds himself in print. Nothing seems easier,

THE READING PUBLIC

so he proceeds at once to write in a week, without thought, something as good as he has developed by months or years of unconscious mental incubation. His product is stilted, self-conscious, written to sell, and fails. Then, despite the appeals of his friend the editor, he thinks himself badly used.

There are hundreds of such instances. I have a friend, a brilliant lawyer, who printed a sonnet in "Scribner's" years ago. It was a good sonnet, too (though I know less about sonnets than any living man). He wrote it after a month's cruising along the New England shore. For a year he did nothing but write sonnets, but never published another. Then he gave up. He said he thought that "Scribner" sonnet was born in him;

THE READING PUBLIC

it probably was, but it was all alone by itself. He now writes very good legal opinions, but no poetry.

Yes, there is something in this theory, for how else can you explain the worthy fathers of large families, sober business men, lawyers and coal-dealers in middle life, who come shyly in with their solitary manuscript, ask for our judgment, implore us not to tell their wives, and then disappear from our office horizon?

Often, however, the "one-story writer" has proved a veritable literary gold mine. In every instance, however, it has been due to the author's willingness to act on suggestions, to cut and prune and revise until the technical craftsmanship of his trade has been learned.

The relation of an editor with

THE READING PUBLIC

writers is not without humor, although they can be at times what Mark Twain calls "very trying." As a rule the most successful ones are the most difficult, and the men are quite as difficult as the women.

I recall one classic instance where an author of reputation obliged his hero to smoke cigars offered him by a widow who described them as having belonged to the dear departed. As in an earlier paragraph the author had placed the time of the gentleman's death as eight years previous, the conclusion was irresistible that the cigars would be a bit dry. But the author was one who permitted no liberties with his manuscripts, and the suggestion of the editor in regard to this incident was ignored.

I do not want to leave the discus-

THE READING PUBLIC

sion of an editor's relations with his authors without adding a word in their behalf. No one is less willing than I to leave in your minds any impression that the author is regarded in any editorial office with anything but respect and affection. I have, perhaps, overemphasized the human aspects of the relationship, but only because they are the least understood.

The men and women who are doing the writing for the best of the magazines are quite human, but they constitute a group of high-minded and delightful gentlemen and gentlewomen who are serving high ideals and with whom it is a rare privilege to be associated in even the most casual manner.

Editorial problems do not end, how-

THE READING PUBLIC

ever, with the mere selection of the copy for each issue. From the mass of accepted material the editor must build his number. First he will select his leader. This is the article which in his opinion will arrest public attention most quickly. It usually has "timely" quality, and has been arranged for months in advance. This is the paper relied upon to cause newspaper controversy and general comment (the best possible form of advertising), and leads the issue for this reason and because the eye of the casual buyer will catch it more readily on the news-stand. Here enters the commercial element.

Occasionally the experiment is tried of using a long poem as a leader. This is a mistake, as diminished sales almost always show. Evidently the pub-

THE READING PUBLIC

lic are a little frightened by a long poem. It looks too literary. It is astonishing how afraid people are of anything they suspect to be literature; they think it must be dull and pass it by. What a pity it is that this bugbear should be allowed to roam at large.

After the leading article the rest of the contributors follow, not in the order of their importance, but so arranged as to create the greatest possible effect of variety, and to appeal to as many different interests as possible.

What to do with poetry is a great question. Editors do not believe in placing it in a number so as to appear as if used to fill up blank spaces at the end of articles, for they do not buy poetry for that purpose. The ex-

THE READING PUBLIC

periment has been tried of grouping it together, making two or three pages of it, but the typographical effect is bad, and this is not often done now. So it is still used on so-called "broken" pages, because the typographical effect is best, and it is a wonderful aid in meeting the exacting mechanical demands of make-up. The material chosen must fill, as a rule, just so many pages, — no more, no less, — and these little spaces are precious.

The editorial guess is often a bad one as to the feature of an issue, and the paper put first may not cause a ripple of interest, while some other buried in the middle of the issue will bring scores of letters to the office.

Having constructed his issue, the editor now girds up his loins for the battle of the proofs. Changes in type

THE READING PUBLIC

are expensive and very few corrections can be made in an hour, and the publisher objects to many of them. It is unreasonable not to let an author make such changes as will manifestly improve his product, but when he wants to rewrite his story or article, or, as in one historic instance, to change the tense of every verb in eleven type pages, the editor must rebel.

After the proofs are all back from the authors, and usually one never comes back or comes so late as to disarrange completely the editor's nicely balanced make-up, the plates are cast and the issue is turned over to the business department to market just as if the completed magazines were shoes or potatoes. The editor heaves a sigh of relief, and then begins to make up the next issue, and so it goes twelve

THE READING PUBLIC

months in the year with no omission of summer numbers or sabbatical years.

Another matter of interest in the office of a magazine is the relation of a periodical to its public. Let us stop for a moment and calculate the number of copies of magazines circulated this month. Estimating their circulations from official figures, nine of the big sellers have distributed over eight million bound periodicals this month; only nine of the thousands published give a combined circulation of over eight million. These enormous circulations bring problems of their own.

One publisher, who has achieved a circulation of over a million copies, employs an expert who provides him with the latest figures from the Census Bureau. He knows the proportion of

THE READING PUBLIC

illiteracy in every State, and in general how rapidly the population is being educated to a point where it can read his publication.

It is very difficult to conceive of a magazine circulation so nearly covering our entire reading population, and it is doubly difficult to conceive of a great public entirely ignorant of many people and things which are household traditions with us.

An editor once told me that at considerable expense he secured the right to use on his cover the portrait of a popular actress by a world-famous artist. He printed beneath the picture the names of the actress and the artist. "Portrait of Miss —— by Mr. ——." He lost thousands of sales of that issue and shrewdly guessed the reason. In his audience few had ever

THE READING PUBLIC

heard of the actress, and practically none of them knew even the name of the artist. If he had called his lovely picture "Youth," or "Happiness," or "An American Queen," the result would have been very different. As these abstract things are known and understood, there would have been no diminution of sales.

It is not, however, with so great and so diverse an audience that the so-called "standard magazines" have to concern themselves. But in association with the subscription list of even one of these there is month after month food for thought for the mind of philosophic habit.

The mild pleasures of conjecture are in themselves a luxury. It is agreeable to be carried out of the routine of one's work, if only for a moment, to

THE READING PUBLIC

wonder what manner of place Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, may be, for it is from this appetizing post-office that a subscriber writes.

The old-fashioned subscriber who "stops his paper" exists to-day, and his letters of angry protest must be answered. It seems to be very difficult for many people to realize that a well-conducted magazine has no editorial bias. No matter what the editor's personal opinions may be, he tries to keep his columns open to the fair discussion of both sides of every big question.

The publication of any paper on such subjects as "Woman Suffrage" or "Vivisection" will swell the editor's mail for weeks, and the letters are not unwelcome. Many suggestions of value come, and how can an editor

THE READING PUBLIC

know if he pleases or displeases his readers unless they tell him?

The same article will be interpreted by readers in exactly opposite ways. One irate gentleman will attack the editor for being anti-Catholic; another will detect evidence in the same article of his rapidly "going over to Rome."

As a rule all such letters are carefully answered and an effort made to show the reader just what the editor's position is. Occasionally letters of unqualified denunciation reach him, as in the case of a breezy Westerner who wrote recently, "Your articles are weak and vapid, your essays nonsense, your stories utterly without interest, and your poetry is rotten. If you only would listen to reason and try to learn how to make a magazine, but you

THE READING PUBLIC

Easterners know it all, so Hell! what's the use!" Such a letter tends to a day of humility in the office, and is a difficult one to answer.

The circulation of such a magazine as the "Atlantic Monthly," for instance, is built up in quite a different manner from that of more popular periodicals. The publishers' problem is to find the largest number of people who will care for the magazine, not to make a magazine to suit the taste of the largest possible number of people. To this end they try to put it into the hands of as many people as possible for trial subscriptions at a nominal price. For this purpose they frequently use the alluring coin-card with a neatly cut hole for a half-dollar and an attractive red label to paste over it.

THE READING PUBLIC

These coin-cards return with wonderful contents. One affluent gentleman sent a twenty-dollar gold-piece by mistake, and its return was a heroic instance of business virtue. An attractive young woman from Peoria sent her photograph neatly framed in the card and asked if it would be accepted for three issues of the magazine.

One gets very human little flashes of life from subscribers' letters. Every editor and publisher receive hundreds of letters, many of them betraying a pathetic desire for self-expression. It is flattering to be taken into a reader's confidence, but how can you answer such a letter as this:—

“The November ‘Atlantic’ came here all right, and when my mother and father called one pleasant afternoon she took it home. I forget what

THE READING PUBLIC

I said on my postal, and do not know how long I shall be here, but I think it will be safe to send it here until you hear from me to the contrary. Winter is coming, and however much my mother may miss me she would not wish me to be at home now. Why I am so sensitive to the cold I do not know, but I am, and the house that has been my home ever since I was a child, even if I have been away more than (or about) two years at a time, was built between forty-five and fifty years ago, and is only warm in the two rooms where the stoves are. My sleeping-room has the same air-tight stove in it that was in the sitting-room when I was a child, and if at home, I have a fire in it night and morning in cool weather. One day last winter (January?) it was so warm that I did

THE READING PUBLIC

not need a fire, but that was a great exception. The main part of the house has twelve good-sized rooms and a little square room over the front entry; then there is the 'L' with four or five rooms, and only my father and mother for occupants by day, and my brother in addition nights and mornings. My father is one of a pair of twins, eighty-five years old, and my mother is eighty-four. Their sleeping-room opens into the sitting-room and into the summer dining-room and winter general-utility room. The house was painted in the autumn, but the blinds are dispersed throughout the house, so we must trust that all will get through the winter all right, but it does seem as though there could be more than two or three people in a sixteen-or-seventeen-room house."

This letter I confess to be an ex-

THE READING PUBLIC

treme example, but magazine readers are very varied in character.

On the back of a poem I once found this list of housewifely duties jotted down by the writer:—

Brown and white silk	Get up laundry
Brown plush	Post bills
Black and white seersucker	Write for samples
Send gloves to be cleaned	Stitch apron
Chicken	Telephone
Creamed potatoes	Water plants and fix bird
Spinach	Wash spinach
Cranberries	Steam the chicken
Baked apples and cream	Make cranberry jelly.
Clean upstairs	

Truly a nice sort of person this, and how much better this list made me like her than the perusal of her poetry.

A Missouri farmer's wife takes the magazine and pays for it in four installments as her accumulated egg-money will permit. A Nantucket fisherman sent thirty-five cents in stamps every month for the current issue.

THE READING PUBLIC

This he did for twenty years, and when death claimed this faithful reader, and we no longer received his quaintly written monthly letter, the office felt a distinct sensation of personal loss.

A Montana sheep-herder takes it because it is a "readable proposition." He was immortalized by Professor Bliss Perry in the "Jack Rabbit Sonnet" which some of you may recall. A Wisconsin banker writes that he "always thought the 'Atlantic' a high-brow publication, but I like it and I've one high brow and one low one."

With more readers come greater responsibilities. I hope you will not receive the impression that the American magazine is a very spineless sort of thing. I have denied it "editorial policy," and I think rightly in the *old-fashioned* sense of the term, but the

THE READING PUBLIC

standard magazines have been busy of late years in divers good causes.

Much of the most radical academic thought of the day has appeared between their covers. They have attacked the defects in our schools and colleges; they have pleaded for our forests; they have steadfastly stood for the cause of peace; and only recently the "Atlantic" was daring enough to criticize the manners of the rising generation.

Despite the very stern commercial consideration which they have to meet, despite the fact that they are all, in the last analysis, "business propositions," they have given, I think, a fairly good account of themselves.

And now a word in behalf of my friend the editor.

THE READING PUBLIC

A popular conception of him is either as a grim ogre delighting in the discomfiture of aspiring authors, or as a man with no ideals pandering to the most unworthy tastes of the reading public.

He is neither. The editors I have known have been gentlemen earnestly engaged in what they regard as a dignified profession, honestly trying to meet the demands of a very exacting position. For the most part they try to make their publications reflect as far as possible the best in the life of the people they reach.

Few are actuated by business motives. The owners of publications are editors only in rare instances, and in every publication office which has any standing at all the business department has little or no control over

THE READING PUBLIC

the editorial policy of the publication.

The making of a magazine is a laborious and often a thankless job. To one letter of sympathy or commendation an editor or publisher receives one hundred of criticism. But the labor is its own reward to one who will make an effort to find it. In almost no other business is one brought so closely in touch with thousands of his fellow beings.

I may be an optimist (I hope I am), but after twenty years' experience I can honestly say that in the mass I have found my fellow being an interesting and attractive person. Any publisher, I believe, will tell you that most people have the humble (and now, perhaps, unfashionable) virtue of business honesty; the average of intelligence

THE READING PUBLIC

is high, and a well-developed moral sense is conspicuous sometimes where you would least expect to find it.

I have spoken of the humor of rejected manuscripts, — they are fair game; but such contributions are not the object of ridicule in any office. We know too well the reason back of many of them. Illiterate, unformed, and unintelligible as many of them may be, they often sober rather than amuse.

No intelligent person has reached years of maturity without feeling within him a vague desire for expression; no one of us has lived a life untouched by grief or disappointment; and these are the sources from which much of this rejected material springs. No editor can open his mail day in and day out without being astonished at the num-

THE READING PUBLIC

ber of poems beginning, "Be still, my heart," etc.; or, "Oh! heart, what wouldst thou?" etc. There are often found in these manuscripts the wretched affectations and posings of insincere mediocrity, but there is found, too, the patient pathos of old age and the shrill cry of impatient, suffering youth.

And now, no New Englander ever put pen to paper without pointing a moral to adorn a tale ever so dull, and I should be unfaithful to a long ministerial ancestry if I did not do so now. What should be your attitude toward those editors and publishers who are trying to give you decent magazines?

Let me tell you how you can help. They want you to share with them their attitude toward that long-suffering and much-abused thing "litera-

THE READING PUBLIC

ture." Do not regard it as a thing remote from life. Do not regard it as a black art familiar only to a chosen guild, as something dull, and in the parlance of the day "too high-brow" for human nature's daily needs. But share with them the conviction that it is but a mode of expression, a medium through which we can interpret this beautiful complex thing about us we call life.

Turn from the writers of cheap and meretricious stuff who are debasing this plastic medium to paint for you untrue and distorted pictures, and cling to and encourage those who would use it (with little skill, perhaps) to bring about a better understanding between man and man, to draw for future generations pictures (truthful and unashamed) of the life of the most

THE READING PUBLIC

wonderful period the world has ever known. If you will do this the day of the ignoble in letters will surely pass, and literature will take its rightful place among the arts.

THE END

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