The Assistants' Opportunity.¹

IN selecting the title for the paper I have the pleasure of presenting to you, I have had in mind opportunity in its broadest sense, covering not only possible future attainment, but present and daily usefulness. I regard the invitation to address you as an opportunity for me, and one which I shall endeavour to improve by presenting to you, as clearly as I can, the possibilities of position as I regard them. I trust my suggestions may prove helpful to you.

In an address of this kind there is great temptation to be dogmatic. My convictions are strong and must be briefly stated. I pray you to take what I say as law and fact only after you have weighed it well by your experience and judgment.

At the outset of any consideration of the position and opportunity of the library assistant it is well for us to face the question as to whether the whole work in which he is to do his share is a worthy and hopeful work in the world. It is a sad world, my masters, as well as a mad one, and mostly sad because of ignorance and selfishness. The library assistant may confidently magnify his office and be happy in this, at least, that he has a part, perhaps a small part, in the most powerful known agency not only for educating mankind, but also for making them happy, and I think the latter end quite as worthy, quite as important, as the former. From this point of view the position of library assistant seems to me to be indisputably one of the most important in the educational system of our English-speaking race. It may be he has little voice in shaping the ideals or the policy of the particular institution in which he works, but whatever those ideals are it is in general only through the assistant that they are executed. The librarian sees a few folk, but it is through the assistant alone that committee and librarian come into touch with the mass of the public, which they are trying to educate and make happy. Well selected books, perfect appliances and

¹ Read before the Library Assistants' Association, February 3rd, 1897.

commodious buildings, must fail of their proper usefulness and influence unless administered by able assistants.

Committees and chief librarians, however learned, and however able in other ways, are unwise and misplaced unless they have the ability to select and train a corps of competent assistants.

The assistants' opportunity is distinctly in the line of his profession, and this in spite of the fact that he is generally hard worked and poorly paid. To accept a position in a library as a temporary thing or as a stepping-stone to something else seems a grave mistake. Those seeking light work and large pay must look elsewhere than in the librarians' profession for them. To succeed, the assistant must be ambitious, and ambitious in his own line—neither content to remain a poorly-paid and over-worked assistant, nor looking for a chance to leave the profession. It is true the ranks are crowded, but the famous saying "there is plenty of room at the top" is as true of this as of all other professions. Efficiency and proficiency are as certain of recognition here as everywhere. If one can do something just a little better than anyone else, it matters little what the thing is, its doer is sure to be rewarded.

The successful assistant must not only be ambitious, but also aggressive (aggressive is not in this case synonymous with belligerent). Do something! Mistakes are excusable, stagnation is unpardonable. Captain Mahan in his *Influence of the Sea Power upon History* very convincingly attributes the successive and disastrous defeats of the French upon the sea to the orders of the ministry to the admirals, to act only on the defensive. The French navy had been freshly equipped at vast expense, and, being rather aghast at their outlay, a mistaken ministry ordered the admirals to engage in battle only with "the greatest circumspection," forgetting that offence is often the most effective defence, and in their desire to preserve their costly ships defeated the very purpose for which the navy was created.

Our libraries are equipped with books at great expense, and we wish to use them with the greatest circumspection too, but let us catch the idea that it is quite possible in being over careful of books to defeat the very purpose of the library. Perhaps, in view of the maritime illustration, and of ~~who~~ the conquerors of the French were in the very struggle referred to, it may sound gratuitous to tell Englishmen to be aggressive, but whoever secures supremacy in the library world must inaugurate

and maintain the same aggressive policy which has made Great Britain so long and so gloriously mistress of the seas.

And what is true of the library as an institution is applicable to the assistant as well, the quality in the assistant being rather better expressed by the term capacity for initiative. With ambition as his glass he will see the possibilities of his own position, his own department, and constantly find ways to widen their scope and efficiency.

The capacity for initiative implies the possession of another desirable quality—self-reliance. Some of us heard not long ago a council of learned librarians discuss how they could help assistants. All very right and proper, and I wish there were more of it—not of discussion, but of help. But the assistant must help himself. Speaking to a distinguished London librarian of the aid he had given a young man, he replied: "How could I help it, he compelled my aid. I could not *help* assisting such a fellow." And this, I think, will always prove true. They who deserve it will get all possible help, for every good man, and every good librarian especially, is like God in this, at least, that he helps those that help themselves.

The idea seems prevalent, and it was more than hinted at in the same learned council to which I have referred, that the assistant in the largest libraries had the greatest opportunity of advancement. I hold an exactly opposite view, namely, that positions in the smaller libraries offer far the best chance. The large libraries, necessarily divided into departments, must assign to each man his own definite work, which he may do for years, and know nothing of what others are doing or of general library administration. In the smaller institutions each worker becomes acquainted with the entire business of the library. Which, I ask you, will be most apt to become the much-talked-of, greatly-desired "all-round" man so needed as chief librarian?

But I have dealt long enough in generalities—glittering or otherwise—and will endeavour to be more specific.

The busy assistant has little chance to become a learned man, but no one has such an opportunity to learn of the sources of knowledge. Pardon a personal illustration. A number of years ago, I was an assistant in the Sage Theological Library in America. One of the learned professors consulted another on some difficult question—just what, I do not now remember—but both were specialists. The answer was: "I do not know, ask Mr. Elmen-dorf." "Why? does he know?" "No, but he will find out for

you." The reply was manna to me, and you may be certain the information was forthcoming. The late Dr. Poole, with whose great work you are all acquainted, when asked for a definition of an ideal librarian, replied: "One who possesses a technical knowledge of everything on earth." I quarrel radically with this definition, although the "dear public" seems sometimes to expect that knowledge. My idea is more of one who, in a kind, intelligent, and sympathetic way, can direct every earnest enquirer how to find out what he wishes to know, and such a man each assistant has an opportunity to become. I used the word "kind" above advisedly; for you can do very little in our work unless you are kind, interested in people, not in problems only.

Mr. F. M. Crunden, Librarian of the St. Louis Public Library, himself a shining example of what a power for good the librarian may be, in an address of this sort, said: "First and foremost, be men. Character is necessary to accomplishment; to be, necessary to do." The assistant to be successful must not only be interested in his work, but must, I repeat, have a kindly interest in people; must forget he is an official, and remember that he is an assistant—an assistant, not only to the librarian and the library, but to the people. This kindness to the people who frequent the library, and interest in their desires, will soon secure to the assistant, without further effort, a clientage as valuable to him as customers to a salesman.

You have an opportunity of meeting many people, and of seeing men on many sides of their lives and characters—keep in touch with life and living men. Let them see that you are a man, and the librarian's profession not only an honourable but a manly one.

You have an opportunity to improve the class of reading of the community. A clergyman once said to me that the assistants in my library could change the reading taste of the community in ten years. I have known a faithful corps of assistants to reduce the percentage of fiction from 80 to 70 per cent. in a single year; and persistent effort will do the like anywhere. Many assistants have literary aspirations; and if these are accompanied by literary ability and instincts the opportunity is indeed great. But again, I implore you, keep to the line of your profession. You know the value of the library; but do not assume on that account that it is widely or generally known. Within a week, I met at a club dinner an educated man, yes, a learned specialist, who calmly told me that he did not believe

in the public library—could see no justice in taxation to give reading to the people. Those who know about our libraries, and can tell what they know, publish the facts about them—the good they are doing—in library papers only, which the general public never reads, and this is not because the magazines and papers of general interest are not open to them. Some time since, the famous and popular newspaper correspondent, Julian Ralph, had an illustrated article in *Harper's Weekly* on the libraries of the Western Lake cities, which proved as attractive to the general public as any of the good things its author has done. Mr. G. W. Peckham's article on the library in connection with the school, which appeared in the *Educational Review*, was quoted by the *Review of Reviews* and other English periodicals. I have myself been assured that the pages of the best magazines were not only open for articles on the public library, but that such contributions would be generously paid for.

By making known in the public press the work of the library we can get more money for that work. Since I have been in England, every project which I have heard mentioned for advancement in library lines has been discouraged because there were no funds available. This is not because there is not plenty of money, but because the necessity of devoting it to the library is not felt.

It is needless to say how much this increase of funds would mean to the assistant. Library committees and chief librarians know that salaries are too low, and would be glad to increase them if they had the means to do so.

Do you know the requirements of a library in the way of a suitable building for economical administration, convenience, accessibility, and well-lighted floor space? Well, very few people do, especially architects, and if you can tell about it you have an opportunity to do no end of good. In my own country barrels of money are spent—wasted—on unsuitable buildings—buildings better fitted for the mausoleums, gaols, cathedrals they look like than free public libraries. I presume the case is the same here.

Practical bibliography also offers the assistant a field for the exercise of his abilities. I do not mean the making of lists of all the books ever published on the subjects chosen, useful as this may be, but full, complete, easy-of-reference records of the resources of his own library on subjects of interest to its patrons. Such lists are of great value, particularly when on topics of

living, timely interest; they attract people to the library, have a great influence on the class of books read, and the knowledge and experience gained by the makers are of inestimable value. Work of this kind not only makes the assistant valuable, but also makes him known.

The perfecting of methods may be greatly furthered by the assistant. Be careful that the new way is better than the old, however, and that circumstances will admit of the change. At least keep informed as to what others are doing.

Cultivate an *esprit de corps* in your own library. Team work, the pulling all altogether, is what tells. The good, conscientious assistant should be like leaven in a library force. Little can be done in our times except by co-operation, and this unselfish co-operative work reacts largely to individual benefit. In conclusion, let me congratulate you on your Assistants' Association. I believe it will prove of great benefit to you and to the profession. I bid you be of good courage and go forward, making your Association not a rival but a feeder of the Library Association. I urge upon you not to miss the opportunity of attending the meetings of the Library Association, even if it means considerable sacrifice. What you hear there, and the acquaintances you make there, will be useful to you your life long.

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