

## The Duties of a Librarian in Relation to the Readers.

THAT there is a certain relative position existing between a librarian and the readers is a fact which, perhaps, each one of us will be prepared to admit, and that relationship, when duly recognised, should be one of our chief objects to cultivate. Every borrower from, or reader in, a library, who reads for information, will also admit that a librarian who does so cultivate this relationship is a decided help to him in his literary researches. There is, it is true, a prevalent idea amongst those who use a library least, that the work of a librarian is very light and easy, and beyond taking note of the books which he hands over the counter he has little or nothing to occupy his time. This fact becomes more apparent from the number and variety of the candidates whenever such a post is declared vacant. There is, perhaps, no appointment which calls forth such a variety of candidates. All sorts of occupations help to swell the list. Unsuccessful tradesmen, shop assistants, superannuated policemen, ex-butlers, all set forth their claims, which some of them look upon as almost impregnable, and if there happens to be one amongst them who some time or other has had charge of a Sunday School Library, he looks upon it as a veritable tower of strength. These sort of candidates in the days of the old style of librarians might have done very well, but during the last few years, with the spread of education and the Free Library movement, the old order has changed and given place to the new, and the librarian who when asked for a work on ornithology would hand Miss Braddon's "Birds of Prey," or classify Ouida's "Moths" under entomology, has departed never to return. The necessity has arisen for an entirely different class of librarians, who aspire to be something more than custodians, and who look upon it as part of their duty to become agents for the advancement of learning. This, however, has little to do with the subject of the paper beyond showing that a person who has had no

special training cannot become an efficient librarian without a certain amount of application and study.

For the purpose of discussing the relationship between the librarian and readers, I will divide the latter into two classes: (1) Those who read for information and instruction, and (2) those who read only for the sake of reading, instead of the good to be obtained from it. With the latter of these the librarian has little connection, and they do not seek for any assistance from him. He hands them the book selected, his services being purely mechanical. It is not even wise of him to suggest a work of fiction, for in this class of literature tastes are so varied that a work which he may consider excellent in every respect would probably be condemned by the one to whom it was issued. It is to the former class—those who read for information—with whom he is in closer relationship, and it is those he should be in a position to guide and direct in their literary requirements. Well, now, how to acquire this degree of usefulness in his profession—and I think, if it is entered upon with a full recognition of its responsibilities, it may be dignified as such—should be one of the chief objects of a librarian's existence. Every librarian should be a reader. He must strive to know something of everything. A librarian who does not read is practically lost, so far as usefulness in his profession is concerned. He may be quick, courteous, obliging, and have the bump of locality very largely developed, but as a librarian he will be of no more use than an ordinary clerk—in fact he is simply a machine. I do not mean to say that a librarian should thoroughly digest every work he picks up—that would be simply impossible; but I do mean to say that he should have a tolerably clear idea of what is contained therein, and should certainly know something of all the most important books committed to his charge. It is not a bad plan to possess a sort of common-place book in which to jot down items in a systematic form for future reference. He should have, at least, a slight knowledge of the sciences—more particularly the natural sciences. He must live in the past as well as the present, and familiarise himself with the various periods of English literature, from the earliest times to the present. He should be perfectly familiar with the history of his own country, and Roman history should by no means be neglected. All cannot be Richard Porsons, yet his acquaintance with the classics should be such as to enable him to trace a quotation. If he possess a knowledge of Greek and Latin, as

well as the modern Continental languages, he will occupy a far more exalted position, and his sphere of usefulness will be proportionately increased ; but it is only the few amongst us whose educational advantages have been such as to enable us to acquire that degree of perfection. In addition to all this, he should know everything about one thing, and take up a subject in which to make himself thoroughly efficient. This will serve as a peg on which to hang other subjects. Those who have never pursued a special branch of study would be astonished at the mass of desultory information obtained whilst following it. Take botany, geology, or astronomy for instance. Personally, I prefer astronomy, but for useful and practical information I should recommend geology ; it gives one a clearer idea of the history of our planet. And, above all things, a librarian should be well up in history, not only political, social, and literary history, but also the physical history of the globe. I have said he should live in the past as well as the present. He must, however, not neglect the present, and should lose no opportunity of acquiring knowledge of all modern scientific discoveries and improvements. He should watch the public doings of the leading men of the age in politics, science, art, and literature. He must keep in view what is being done by the publishing world, and should make a note of the best books published on all important subjects. I would also advise that he make a note of the best articles on various subjects which appear from time to time in the periodical literature, classing them under their specific headings. This, although entailing a deal of labour, will be found useful, and will have the advantage of drawing him into closer relationship with the readers. There are numerous matters treated of in a magazine, on which no work has been written, or if written he may not have in his library, and it will be a gratification to him to be able to point out to his readers where, at all events, may be found some information on a particular subject, if required. And again, to return to history, he should have a complete knowledge of the topography and the history, physical, political, and social, of his own county. He should strive his utmost to acquire knowledge on this particular matter. If in his library he does not happen to have a good collection of local literature let him collect every scrap of information he possibly can relating to the county, and he will then be in a position to at least direct a reader as to where certain information is to be found.

There are many other links in the relationship which I have not touched upon, but perhaps I have enumerated the most important. Well, now, having fortified himself with all this information, how is it to be applied, and in what position does this ideal librarian stand to the reader? He has certainly benefited himself; in what way has he increased his usefulness in his position? Briefly, he is in a position to guide the seeker after knowledge into the right paths, and keep him from being embarrassed by a boundless field of choice. I know there are readers who do not care to avail themselves of the services of a librarian. They have sufficient confidence in themselves, and in very many cases know quite as well as the librarian where to look for whatever information they may require, but there are others who do not possess this knowledge, and have yet to learn how to make the best use of a library. As a rule these readers have not a very lofty idea of a librarian's duty. They lose sight of the fact that a large percentage of his time is employed—or should be—in acquiring information on a multitude of subjects so as to be able to render assistance when required to do so. I will illustrate what I mean by the following case. A gentleman happened to be looking up a subject in natural history. He went into a library and enquired for the "Encyclopædia Britannica." "What letter?" asked the librarian. "N," was the reply, and the volume was accordingly handed to him. After looking into it a few minutes he gave it back to the attendant, and asked for a catalogue. The letter "N" was here looked through, and the book was put down with a look of disgust, and the gentleman prepared to take his departure. The librarian's instinct told him the information sought for had not been found, and as he was going away delicately hinted that if there happened to be any subject upon which he was seeking information, he would be pleased to help him. "Oh, yes," he replied, "I want to know something about Newts, but you don't appear to have anything." The librarian at once gave him a book on British Reptiles, where he found all he required in less than ten minutes. Now, had he in the first instance told the librarian what he required, he would have saved not only his own time, but also that of the attendant. I quote this as an instance in which the reader fails to recognise one of the principal duties of a librarian. Then there are those who will go to another extreme, and expect a librarian to be an open volume on almost every subject. I am afraid this is somewhat straining the relationship. However much one may aspire

to become a walking encyclopædia he will find life too short to accomplish the object. Sufficient will it be if he is, in most cases, able to point out where information is to be obtained. I have seen on library book-labels that a work is not to be supplied unless specified by title and number, and it has struck me that if this law became general and was rigidly adhered to, the relationship existing between librarian and reader would no longer exist. I take it that one of the chief advantages to a reader on visiting a library is that he may look to the librarian for assistance and guidance in his researches. Of course, in the case of those who read only for the sake of reading, the rule might very well apply. There is another section of readers I have not included in the foregoing—the juvenile section. Their future tastes for literature depend very much upon what is put into their hands whilst young. In this matter the librarian has a great responsibility, for it should be a part of his duty to prevent the misuse as well as to encourage the right use of books. Those who have the management of Free Libraries will agree that as a rule children are left too much to themselves in the selection of their literature. I am now speaking principally of the children of the working classes. The parents have no time and, in many instances, very little taste for reading. It is not, therefore, to be expected that they can guide their children in making a proper selection of books. In many places—take Nottingham for example—there are children's libraries in connection with the central library, and here there is a selection of books exactly suitable for young people. Still, even this does not remedy the evil referred to. Children will go in for thrilling and exciting adventure, and the more thrilling and exciting it is, the better they like it. Practically there is no harm in it if not carried to excess, but it is the excess that the librarian should lose no opportunity of preventing. Whenever and wherever possible he should recommend books of an educational character, books that will give them a taste for the higher paths of literature. I know this is a somewhat difficult matter, especially in public libraries, and in subscription libraries the parents are usually well able to guide their children in the choice of books. There are certainly some parents in subscription libraries even who leave this matter very much in the hands of the librarian, but they have sufficient confidence in him to know that the trust will not be abused. If every librarian discharges this duty conscientiously, it will have the effect of raising librarianship to a higher level, and create another link in the relationship.

There is still another responsibility and relationship to which I shall only briefly refer. It is to the State. To be true to his profession he must endeavour to create a love of reading and a taste for study. In these days of great public libraries there is abundance of scope for such an exertion. The demand which has recently sprung up for the Rider Haggard type of fiction is being indulged in to such an extent that there is a danger of those who have the selection of books for our libraries catering too much for this taste, and neglecting most of the higher literature of the day. The taste for reading, as all librarians know, is greatly on the increase, and with the spread of education will increase still more. It is, therefore, for librarians of our public libraries to instruct the public to read wisely, and to assist in directing a choice of literature which will eventually bear good fruit.

In concluding this paper, let it be understood I am fully aware of my own shortcomings. There are many who have had a much wider experience of library work than myself, and who would have been better able to deal with the subject. Be that, however, as it may, I conscientiously believe it to be the duty of every librarian to endeavour to realise a high ideal of his vocation. Though we may not all be able to arrive at the highest, let us remember that the higher our aspirations the greater perfection may we hope to attain, the greater will be our success, the brighter ornament will each one be in his profession, and more lofty will become the standard of librarianship.

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