

"PERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN LIBRARIANS AND READERS"

BY SAMUEL S. GREEN, WORCESTER FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

[p. 74] When scholars and persons of high social position come to a library, they have confidence enough, in regard to the cordiality of their reception, to make known their wishes without timidity or reserve.

Modest men in the humbler walks of life, and well-trained boys and girls, need encouragement before they become ready to say freely what they want.

A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend, and the recognition of some one at hand who will listen to inquiries, even although he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions, and put them at once on home footing.

Persons who use a popular library for purposes of investigation generally need a great deal of assistance. A few illustrations will produce a vivid realization of the correctness of this statement. Here, for instance, is a wall-painter who has a room to ornament. He wishes to assist his imagination, and comes to the library to look at specimens of decorative painting. It does not serve the purpose of such a man to send him to the catalogues of the library and bid him select the books he desires. You must make the selection yourself, get the works he needs, and hand them to him. You have several to select from. Shall you give him Jones's "Grammar of Ornament" or Racinet's "L'Ornement Polychrome"? Certainly, if he wishes merely suggestion and inspiration, and to look only at details of ornamentation. These works contain examples of the best ornamentation in vogue in different ages and countries, and show the workman who aims at perfection what he has to attain to. Generally speaking, however, the work represented in these books is too elaborate for common use, is hard to execute, and would cost more than a householder is willing to spend in ornamenting a room.

The painter wishes also to see details in combination, and to judge of colors and figures in juxtaposition by looking upon [p. 75] the representation of a whole wall or room. His want is met best by giving him volumes of some such approved works as "Architektonisches Skizzenbuch" or the "Journal-Manuel de Peintures."

An artisan has the legs of a table to carve. His imagination is momentarily barren, and he desires assistance. You do not ask him what book he would like to see, but get him Liénard's "Spécimens de la Decoration et de l'Ornementation," Talbert's "Gothic Forms," Ungewitter's "Gothische Möbel," or pictorial representations of such specimens of the work of Eastlake and Morris as you can lay your hands on.

A marble-worker calls for an engraving of a lion in some specified posture; a wood-carver wishes to see a representation of an eagle. You take the time that is necessary to hunt up whatever these men desire to see.

A member of a society of Englishmen wishes to find a particular representation of the contest between St. George and the Dragon. You request an assistant to look through the tables of contents of the London Art journal, and by this means very likely find what is wanted.

A school-girl has heard that the number of feet in a yard-measure was determined by the length of some king's arm. She asks for the name of the king. Catalogues fail to show where the information is to be found. It at once occurs to the librarian, however, that answers to such questions can usually be had by reference to *Notes and Queries*. He sends for the indexes of this periodical, and finds the information desired. In handing the needed volume to the inquirer, he takes a minute to caution her that there are many stories and traditions which it will not do to accept as facts without careful examination of the evidence adduced in their corroboration. The librarian utters a similar timely word of caution when asked about other historical stories of doubtful credibility, when called upon, for instance, to give an account of Captain Smith and Pocahontas, or of the Blue Laws of Connecticut.

A school-boy calls for a history of the Suez Canal. You see at once, probably that what he needs is a brief

account, and refer him to some recently-issued encyclopaedia. At the same time you show him how to use dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and tell him he can often find answers to questions himself by works of this kind, but invite him to you whenever he encounters snags or fails to get the information sought after.

Another school-girl wishes to see a description of the ceremony of the Marriage of the Adriatic. If the librarian remembers in what book such a description may be found, he has the book brought. Otherwise he sends for a dozen volumes about Venice, and teaches the inquirer how to find the desired account by the use of indexes and tables of contents. Very likely she will give up the search without finding it. Then you take hold to aid her, and show her how to use books and obtain information when wanted.

A citizen is building a house which he wishes to protect against injury from lightning. He is subjected to the customary visits of the vendors of lightning-rods, and becomes somewhat confused by the conflicting statements of these practical men, or is impressed by the conviction that some of these worthies display great ignorance of the scientific grounds upon which their opinions rest. He is crowded by business, but still glad to spend a single hour in a library, if in that length of time he can become acquainted with the views of some of the best writers on the applications of electricity, and so enable himself to proceed understandingly to the work in hand. In such a case, of course, the librarian must get the books which contain the desired in- [p. 76] formation, and hand them to the reader open at the proper pages.

Another business man wishes for certain statistics of trade, manufactures, and inventions. He has no time to spare in collecting the books he desires. He does not know how to get hold of them so well as a librarian does. He states his wants, and the librarian sends to the secretaries of organizations having the interests of different manufactures in keeping, to get the latest published statistics relating to silk or wool manufactures, or the production of iron and steel and other commodities. The inquirer is also furnished with the volumes containing the record of the census, and with other publications of the bureaus of our government, and is supplied with such compendiums as the "Statesman's Year Book," "Timbs' Wonderful Inventions," and the volume containing the papers recently printed in *Harper's Magazine* which treat of the progress of the United States during the last one hundred years in mechanics, commerce, and manufactures.

Men who consult the reports of the Commissioner of Patents in order to see the specifications and drawings of different patented articles, may frequently be greatly aided by a word from the librarian. Almost all investigators are glad to have their labors shortened by availing themselves of assistance. The librarian knows, for instance, just what indexes of patents have been published, when the reports ceased coming in the old form, what drawings have been issued by the Office at Washington, and wherein the incompleteness of a set of reports lies, and how its deficiencies may be supplied.

A young man has just become a member of a debating society, and is called upon to discuss such questions as the advisableness of taxing church property; the comparative value of the systems of prohibition and license in the treatment of the vice of intemperance; and the wisdom of placing the management of railroads in the hands of the State, or of continuing the use of the Bible in the opening exercises of the public schools. Such a person is kept from discouragement in his early attempts to get at information, if he can avail himself of the aid of some one who stands by to show him where to find the legislative reports, pamphlets, and editorials which contain discussions of these questions. The assistance he receives gives him confidence to pursue further investigations. The librarian, too, in his intercourse with him, reminds him that in order to become a successful debater he must always consider both sides of a question, and weigh the arguments of opponents.

A small boy wishes to see a description of the eggs of different New England birds. The librarian knows of some good work with colored illustrations to give him.

A somewhat older boy wants to know how to build a boat, and is furnished with book, magazine article, or papers which contain the necessary directions.

Some inquirer has heard that there was a day in the last century during a large portion of which the obscurity

of the sun was so great that it is known in tradition as the Dark Day. He wishes to know the date of this day, and to find a description of it. Perhaps it puzzles the librarian to tell where to look for the desired description. He begins a search, however, and in half an hour or so unearths the account from some town history—say that of Newbury, Newburyport, and West Newbury, by Coffin.

A curious woman asked me a few months since to give her a book which would show what the "scollop" is. This, you will remember, is an article of food which appears in considerable quantities in our markets. It was only after an hour's [p. 77] search that I found out from Verrill and Smith's "Invertebrate Animals of Vineyard Sound and Adjacent Waters, etc.," that it is the "central muscle which closes the valves" of a certain shell.

A reservoir dam gives way. Citizens become suspicious that too little care is taking in making the repairs. You drop a line to the chairman of the proper committee of the city government to say that you have just received Humber's "Water Supply of Towns" from London. He calls for the work, and takes it home to study.

An unlearned student wishes to know something about the families of languages or the recent explanations of the origin of mythology. You pick out for him some simple hand-book on the subject.

"Is it true," inquires a young lady, that the little bust we see so often, and which is generally called 'Clyte,' should be called "Clytie"?" The librarian answers "Yes."

"Isn't the sentence, 'God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' in the Bible?" asks another. The librarian answers "No," and refers for further information to Bartlett's "Familiar Quotations."

One inquirer has to be told which is the best atlas to use in looking for places in Servia; another, which will give most accurately, and with greatest minuteness, the situation of the rivers and battlefields mentioned in current accounts of Indian hostilities.

A citizen is about to emigrate, and desires a late description of the State and town to which he intends to move.

A board of trade is discussing the question of the advisableness of introducing the metric system of weights and measures into common use. Members call upon librarians to furnish the best treatises on the subject.

A young man about to make the voyage to India for his health, asks you to give him a list of books to read while on ship-board. Another person wishes it similar list for use in a summer vacation.

The librarian is often consulted about courses of reading, and his judgment in regard to what are the best epitomes of the histories of different countries, and of different branches of knowledge, is frequently sought for.

When an inquirer has satisfied himself that a book recommended will suit him, he often wishes to buy it, and the librarian tells him its cost and where it can be procured.

A student in a technical school wishes aid in selecting the subject of a thesis, and in gathering materials to use in preparing it. A school-boy asks for hints and information to use in writing a composition.

A librarian is frequently asked to give information in regard to things and processes which he knows nothing about. Perhaps he is called upon to produce a description of an object the name of which is unknown to him. I remember slyly consulting a dictionary to find out what a "cam" is, and again for the definition of "link-valve motion."

But having acquired a definite notion of the object concerning which information is desired, the habit of mental classification, which a librarian acquires so readily, comes to his aid. He sees at once in what department of knowledge the description sought for may be found, and brings to the inquirer authoritative treatises in this department

Enough illustrations have been given to show that readers in popular libraries need a great deal of assistance. CAM has been taken to select principally such as show that this is particularly needed by persons unused to handling books or conducting investigations. In the case of such persons, as well as with scholars, it is practicable to refer applicants for in- [p. 78] formation which you cannot supply, to libraries in larger cities in the neighborhood of your own library, or to other institutions in your own town. Business men go to commercial centres so often that they can occasionally consult larger libraries than those accessible at home.

It would be easy to show that scholars, as well as unlearned persons, receive much aid in pursuing their studies from an accomplished librarian, although he has not the knowledge of a specialist. It would make this paper too long, however, to illustrate this part of the subject.

There are obvious limits to the assistance which a librarian can undertake to render. Common-sense will dictate them. Thus no librarian would take the responsibility of recommending books to give directions for the treatment of disease. Nor would he give legal advice nor undertake to instruct applicants in regard to the practical manipulations of the workshop or laboratory.

I have not been unmindful, in what has been said, of the great value of the assistance rendered readers by certain catalogues which have been issued lately. There is little danger of appreciating too highly such work as that for which we are indebted to Mr. Noyes, Mr. Cutter, and Mr. Winsor and his able assistants I need not remind you, however, that many persons who use a library have to be instructed in regard to the use of catalogues, and need practice before they can use them to the best advantage. Entries are overlooked. Discrimination is lacking for separating good books from those of little merit, and books adapted to the capacity and particular needs of the user from those which are unsuited to his requirements. It frequently happens, also, that readers do not know under what general subject to look for a minute piece of information. Lately constructed catalogues are so made as to facilitate immensely the researches not only of scholars, but of the general unlearned reader. When the admirable notes found in some of the catalogues of the Boston Public Library, and in the catalogue of the library at Quincy, Massachusetts, shall have been increased in numbers and made to include information in regard to the literature of all branches of knowledge, they will, particularly if kept up to date, be found of inestimable service by the general reader and inexperienced student. But the time is distant when the whole field of knowledge can be covered by these notes; and even when it shall be occupied, much personal assistance will still be needed by readers in popular libraries.

Of course, too, it will always be necessary for a librarian to extend to readers the hospitalities of his institution.

Among the good results which attend personal intercourse on the part of the librarian with users of popular libraries, the following may be mentioned.

First. If you gain the respect and confidence of readers, and they find you easy to get at and pleasant to talk with, great opportunities are afforded of stimulating the love of study and of directing investigators to the best sources of information.

Second. You find out what books the actual users of the library need, and your judgment improves in regard to the kind of books it is best to add to it. You see what subjects the constituency of the institution are interested in, and what is the degree of simplicity they require in the presentation of knowledge.

Third. One of the best means of making a library *popular* is to mingle freely with its users, and help them in every way. When this policy is pursued for a series of years in any town, a very large portion of the citizens receive answers to questions, and the conviction spreads [p. 79] through the community that the library is an institution of such beneficent influences that it can not be dispensed with.

Fourth, and last. The collections of books which make up the contents of the circulating departments of our libraries have been provided for the use of persons of differing degrees of refinement and moral susceptibility, and for those who occupy mental planes of various altitudes.

Now, the policy advocated of freedom of intercourse between librarian and readers, when adopted in the conduct of these departments, does much to give efficiency to the efforts of the officers to get readers to take out wholesome books and such works as are adapted to their capacity and the grade of enlightenment to which they belong. It is a common practice, as we all know, for users of a library to ask the librarian or his assistants to select stories for them. I would have great use made of this disposition. Place in the circulating department one of the most accomplished persons in the corps of your assistants--some cultivated woman, for instance, who heartily enjoys works of the imagination, but whose taste is educated. She must be a person of pleasant manners, and -while of proper dignity, ready to unbend, and of social disposition. It is well if there is a vein of philanthropy in her composition. Instruct this assistant to consult with every person who asks for help in selecting books. This should not be her whole work; for work of this kind is best done when it has the appearance of being performed incidentally. Let the assistant, then, have some regular work, but such employment as she can at once lay aside when her aid is asked for in picking out books to read. I am confident that in some such way as this a great influence can be exerted in the direction of causing good books to be used.

The person placed in charge of this work must have tact, and be careful not to attempt too much. If an applicant would cease to consult her unless she gives him a sensational novel, I would have her give him such a book. Only let her aim at providing every person who applies for aid with the best book he is willing to read.

Personal intercourse and relations between librarian and readers are useful in all libraries. It seems to me that in popular libraries they are indispensable. Six years ago I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Free Public Library of the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. At that time I noticed that its reference department was hardly used at 4 and was fast becoming an unpopular institution. During the last five or six years, by the adoption of the means recommended in this paper, a large use of this department has grown up, and it has come to be highly appreciated in the community.

It is because an interesting experience- in the Worcester Library has led me to place a high value upon personal intercourse between librarian and readers that I have ventured to call your attention to the subject in the paper I am now reading.

Certain mental qualities are requisite or desirable in library officers who mingle with readers. Prominent among these is a courteous disposition which will disclose itself in agreeable manners. Sympathy, cheerfulness, and patience are needful. Enthusiasm is as productive of good results here as elsewhere.

A librarian should be as unwilling to allow an inquirer to leave the library with his question unanswered as a shop-keeper is to have a customer go out of his store without making a purchase.

Receive investigators with something of the cordiality displayed by an old-time [p. 80]

inn-keeper. Hold on to them until they have obtained the information they are seeking, and show a persistency in supplying their wants similar to that manifested by a successful clerk in effecting a sale.

It is important to have a democratic spirit in dealing with readers in popular libraries. The librarian is not, of course, to overlook the neglect of deference which is due him, or to countenance in any way the error which prevails to a considerable extent in this country, that because artificial distinctions of rank have been abolished here, there need be no recognition of the real differences among men in respect to taste, intellect, and character. But he runs little risk in placing readers on a footing of equality with himself. The superiority of his culture will always enable him to secure the respectful treatment which belongs to him when confronted by impudence or conceit.

What is needed in the librarian is a ready sympathy with rational curiosity, by whomsoever manifested, and a feeling of pleasure in brightening any glimmerings of desire that manifest themselves in lowly people to grow in culture or become better informed in regard to the scientific principles which underlie the processes of their daily occupations.

In personal intercourse with readers, there are certain mental tendencies which should be restrained. Idle curiosity is one of them. Many scholars prefer to pursue their studies privately, and are annoyed if they think they are observed.

Respect reticence. If you approach a reader with the purpose of aiding him, and find him unwilling to admit you to his confidence, regard his wishes and allow him to make investigations by himself.

Be careful not to make inquirers dependent. Give them as much assistance as they need, but try at the same time to teach them to rely upon themselves and become independent.

Avoid scrupulously the propagation of any particular set of views in politics, art, history, philosophy, or theology. "*Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur*" are words which Virgil puts into the mouth of Queen Dido. The *North American Review* has adopted them as its motto. The promise they contain is one that should be kept by the librarian also.

The librarian who uses his position to make proselytes prostitutes his calling. State the mental tendencies and the characteristics of disputants, but do not become their advocates.

If a reader, ask you for your own views regarding some matter about which there is controversy, give them to him if you choose. Decline to give them if you choose. Remind him, however, in either case, that if he wishes to have an opinion of his own, he must study the subject in its different aspects and form one for himself. Say gently to immature persons that they can not expect to have opinions upon profound controverted questions, and that they must wait until they grow in knowledge, and until their reasoning powers develop, before their views on such matters will be of value.

Avoid religiously the practice of cramming the minds of young inquirers with one-sided views in regard to questions in dispute.

In the largest libraries it will be found impossible for the superintendent to deal personally with many of the readers. If, however, of such a temperament that he takes pleasure in associating with the users of the library, he can, by only giving a few minutes in a day to the work, do a great deal to make visitors and students feel that an air of hospitality pervades the institution. Most of the inter- [p. 81] course in such libraries must be between readers and accomplished or specially informed assistants.

In many of the smaller libraries the officers can not find time to mingle freely with readers. Perhaps, in some such cases, it may be practicable for librarians to avail themselves of gratuitous assistance by public-spirited and educated residents. I should think there are, for instance, many cultivated and philanthropic women in the country whose services can be availed of to do work of the kind recommended. The boards of trustees and directors which manage public libraries may be relied on to appreciate this kind of work, and are always inclined to further its performance by allowing time to the librarian in which to do it.

The more freely a librarian mingles with readers, and the greater the amount of assistance he renders them, the more intense does the conviction of citizens, also, become, that the library is a useful institution, and the more willing do they grow to grant money in larger and larger sums to be used in buying books and employing additional assistants.

In conclusion, I wish to say that there are few pleasures comparable to that of associating continually with curious and vigorous young minds, and of aiding them in realizing their ideals.