

# SATISFYING THE CURIOUS

## Queer Questions in a Public Library

"SOME people manage to land wonderful jobs," said the reference library habitué. He stopped flicking over the pages of a book and pointed to a uniformed girl seated at a desk, apparently just reading. "Take me; I've worked in an office all my life, filling up ledgers. Now that sort of job would have suited me down to the ground. I like books."

Another patron spoke up. "Reckon you could do that girl's job, do you? Have you the three important qualifications—a competent knowledge of the shelves, thorough experience of cataloguing, and infinite patience with the public?"

The first man licked a finger, flipped over another page and sniffed. "Wouldn't take me long to learn."



"... With singular ease and speed"

A LOVE of books is only one attribute of a library assistant. Readiness to answer curious and sometimes disconcerting questions is another. Here are two or three we heard in a quarter-of-an-hour the other day: Who invented the gondola? What is a hautboy? What is frequency modulation in broadcasting and can I have a work on the subject?

Sometimes the query is answered immediately. Assistants are not expected to be walking chronologies of

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the other side of the road were making sound effects of their own with pneumatic drills. There was a constant low rumble in the studio.

"That's a nice sort of background noise for the cardinal," remarked the producer. "It will be just our luck if it is loudest in the quietest scene." But in the playback it was hardly noticeable.

Recording for radio presentations is a serious business and treated seriously. A player who is late for a rehearsal holds up the whole show, so punctuality is one of the essentials. A cold in the head might mar a speech, so, while a serial is in production, players are expected to take care of themselves.

Obviously everyone enjoys the work. The general atmosphere in the production studio is one of high pressure, but the tension is occasionally relieved by a smothered laugh when an actor muffs his lines, or, as happened the other morning, announces solemnly that the royal croach is approaching.

In contrast with stage work, there is no anxious period of waiting for the first night. Immediately an episode has been recorded, the cast assembles in the cutting room to hear the finished product. If it does not meet with the approval of the producer, it can always be done over again. But every effort is made to see that the players are as near to perfection as possible before recording starts, for the discs are not cheap.

Before very long, listeners to the NBS will hear the story of the cardinal who possessed a fatal ring, a ring which brought death to anyone who kissed it.

events, but in an up-to-date library they can generally lay their hands on any work of reference with singular ease and speed. Obscure subjects may take some little time to hunt out, but in the end the question is generally answered to the satisfaction of the inquirer. In a single day the spate of questions at any public library would give the inexperienced an outsize headache.

"I am producing a children's play," a stern-looking woman announced pontifically. "What sort of costume would a boy of eleven have worn in England 150 years ago? It is absolutely essential that I should have the correct garb." An assistant went straight to a volume, "Costumes of England Through the Ages."

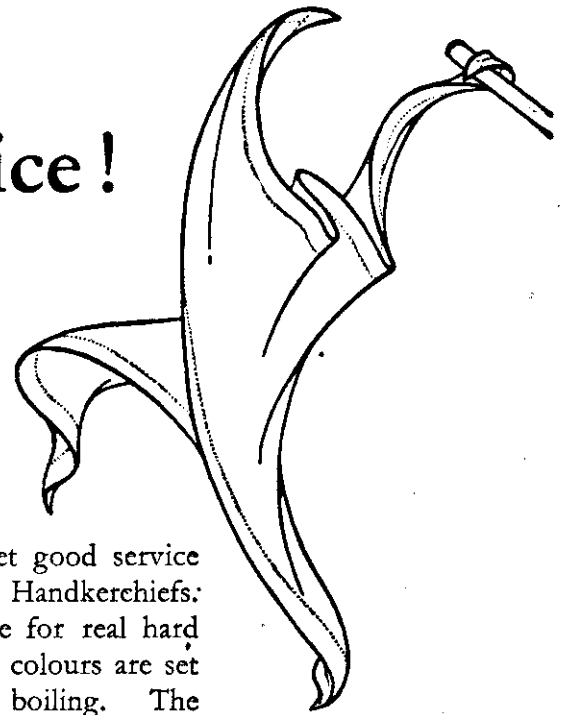
A STUDENT of anthropology recently discovered that the European soldier of to-day is somewhat taller than his old, bold counterpart of the 14th century. But why, and by how much? Even the head librarian was stumped. Hours were spent searching the shelves. The librarian, himself a returned soldier, said that he knew from experience that to-day's soldiers were only 3½ inches tall when under shellfire or being dive-bombed. But seriously, he didn't know of any way of arriving at the exact difference. Perhaps the Army authorities would help. What about trying Base Records, or the medical section?

The student continued his search. Government publications were scanned, but the answer was not there. He found pictures of Sir Guy clanking off to the wars in armour and chain mail and gathered that 60lb. or 70lb. of armour would constrict and compress anybody. Possibly that was why the 14th century warrior averaged 5ft. 6in. in height. Today's soldier also carries a considerable weight of equipment when going into action but, for some reason or other, he has topped his forbears.

Eventually the Army produced the information that the average height of the European warrior of 1939-45 is 5ft. 8in.

Nothing surprises, much less upsets, librarians, and it is a rare sort of person who does not leave the reference department of a library with a healthy respect for those who work in it. Unfortunately very few of us yet realise that this service is available to us.

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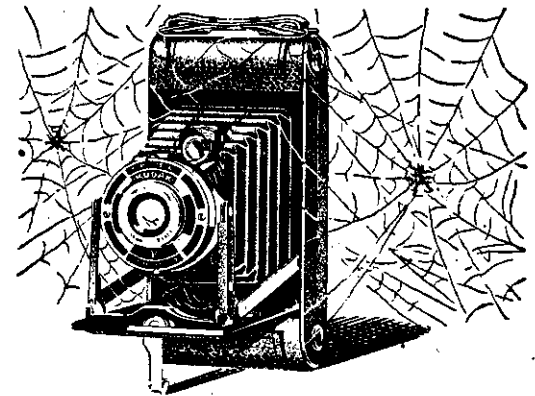


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