

# ORDEAL BEHIND THE SWEETS COUNTER

I THINK I shall have to start a corner for Pet Peeves. I seem to have encountered several of them lately. Last week I talked to several probationers who thought that sick women were brats. Yesterday I listened to a shop assistant telling me that Christmas customers were crabs. This, of course, opens quite a wide field. Next week I can do an E.P.S. warden on "Householders are Hopeless," or the mayor of somewhere or other on "Citizens are Silly," and the following week a discourse by a seasonal worker on "Farmers Are Frightful," or by an employee who worked over Christmas on "Bosses are Boring."

But to get back to this week, which is about customers being crabs. Perhaps I picked the wrong night for my interview. At any rate, my friend confessed that she was very tired, and though in the daytime, when I had seen her behind the counter, her face had been one bright Christmas smile beneath her starched cap, to-night she looked limp and rather pale. But eight hours a day behind the sweets counter of a large chain store is not likely, you'll agree, to make for abounding vitality in the evenings.

"There must be some bright moments," I protested.

"Oh, there are. There are the intelligent customers, for instance."

"I don't see how the buying of a sixpenny bag of sweets, all ready wrapped, gives a customer a chance to show whether he's intelligent or otherwise."

"I call an intelligent customer anyone who comes in, asks for what he wants, gets it, pay for it, and walks out again. And if that's the criterion there are very few intelligent customers—perhaps one in twenty."

"What do they do instead of being intelligent?"

## The Worst Fault

"The customer's worst fault, I suppose, is coming into the shop and turning things over idly without having the slightest intention of buying anything. When you say, 'Is there anything you require, Madam?' she starts guiltily and says, 'No, thank you, I'm just looking round.' We always translate this into just mucking round."

"I suppose the next worst fault is curiosity. Last year at Christmas time we displayed a number of chocolate novelties, little figures and animals and toy trains. They were marked 'Fragile' and one side was obviously the same as the other, yet people had to pick them up to have a look at the other side, or turn them upside down to see the brand on the bottom. And it wasn't legitimate curiosity, for in most cases they hadn't the slightest intention of buying them.

Usually it was a case of wanting something to fiddle with while they talked to friends.

"Still worse than the habit of turning the figures round was the habit of shaking them, apparently to see whether the Fragile label was just a hoax. They would go on talking to their friends and shaking absent-mindedly at the same time. Ultimately, of course, the head would fall off, and the customer would put it back on the counter in the same absent-minded manner, and quickly, but absently, drift away.

## "Lost My Faith"

"I felt last Christmas that I had lost my faith in people. Humanity depressed me so much. Everybody seemed so stupid and unheeding. Fortunately the children have much better manners than the grown-ups, and that puts a more cheerful complexion on everything."

"Perhaps the children have the merit of knowing what they want?" I suggested.

"The grown-ups certainly haven't. They don't know what they want when they come in, so they drift along the counter looking for things. That is, of course, quite understandable. Having got to the far end of the counter, they buttonhole an assistant at that end with a request for something at the other end. Our counter is about forty feet long, and there isn't much space behind, which means that the assistant has to squeeze past five others to get to the door end of the counter and then has to return with her threepennyworth to the far end again. The customer will then request threepennyworth of the stuff next to it, so the assistant makes the same journey again. She will be lucky if the customer actually did mean the stuff next to it. She probably discovers that she meant the next but one, in which case the assistant makes a third journey.

"She returns at last, and stretches out a hand for the sixpence. The customer, meanwhile, has discovered that she has only fourpence in her purse, apart from a five pound note that she doesn't want to break, so the assistant is requested to take out 'twopennyworth, a pennyworth of each.' The satisfied customer goes away, but the assistant bites back her comments and advances with a smile to the next customer, who is just as likely as the last to change her mind several times before handing over her sixpence."

"Couldn't you insist that the customer asked for each variety of sweet by name?"

## Vague Wave of the Hand

"We can't insist, but the names are on everything clearly enough. We're lucky if we get anything more than a vague wave of the hand. The rest we do by intuition. By the way, you'd think

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Miss Thora O'Neill, a member of "The Listener" staff, is the first woman in New Zealand to pass the Third Class Provisional Radio Operator's Certificate. Miss O'Neill joined the Signallers' Corps of the W.W.S.A. in October, 1940, and was a member of the first group of women selected to take the course in wireless operating given by the Union Steamship Company. Since last July she has been receiving special tuition for her operator's certificate.

She is now qualified to hold a position as assistant wireless operator on any ship. Miss O'Neill is at present waiting to be called up by the Navy, and after a further course of training she may be drafted to a naval shore station.

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everybody would know what a box of chocolates looked like, wouldn't you? The other day a customer asked me if that box contains biscuits or are they sweets of some kind. And yesterday a quite youngish woman wanted to know what those pink packets were for. I can't decide whether she's never seen chewing gum or whether she was just passing the time of day. Lots of people do, you know. I have listened to the life stories of dozens of people, most of which sound as though they were taken from *True Confessions*. If, in a desperate attempt to get away, you move to serve a customer, they fix you with an ancient mariner eye and say, 'Wait, dear, somebody else will attend to them.'

"Another thing I'm forced to notice about people is their passion for getting to the bottom of things. We usually open a box of chocolates so that people can see what they're buying. We then cover the box with cellophane, but in spite of the transparency of cellophane, people aren't satisfied that they can see the chocolates properly unless they tear off the cellophane first. In the same way they're not satisfied with seeing the top layer, they must make sure that the bottom layer is the same.

## Open Each One

"And if they see a stack of boxes, identical on the outside and the top one is open, they must open each of the others to make sure that the contents of each are the same. By the time they come to the bottom box of the pile the whole stack overbalances. But the customers were after all only on their way to some other shop, so the assistant picks the chocolates up."

"And while she's stooping somebody treads on her toes," I suggested.

"Yes, and then several people fall over her."

We both sighed.

"Have a chocolate?" I suggested.

She took one wearily. "It's a fallacy to suppose that people who are allowed to eat sweets all day grow to dislike them. You merely develop a taste for the more expensive varieties. And besides, there's always the hope that, what with the behind-counter space being so narrow, they'll soon have to transfer me to another department."

—M.I.



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