

# SCORN NOT THE BANKER

## He's a Good Fellow—

Says Lynn Doyle in a BBC Home Service Talk

I AM a retired manager of 40 years' experience in a bank, mostly in Northern Ireland; and in all that time I never heard of anyone boasting that he was a bank clerk. There is nothing very dashing or swashbuckling, about the life. The young banker wears no uniform in peace time, remember, unless it be the office coat by which he frugally lengthens the span of his out-of-door jacket. He bestrides nothing more fiery in the four-legged way than an office stool; and casts down—or casts up—whole columns of figures with a pen instead of a sword. He is a steady-going fellow, who keeps good hours, a suburbanite, a season-ticket holder, an evening-worker in villa gardens with geometrical beds. He plays tennis, and sings in the choir, and paints in water-colours. He marries sedately, and after the first heat of youth; and in general, chooses a more adventurous life for his son.



### Good To Live With

But he is a good fellow, and a pleasant chap to live with, and makes a happy woman of his wife. His business is a competitive one. Unlike the public servant, he cannot assert his dignity as an individual by a certain brusqueness of manner, a "take it or leave it" attitude. There is only one post-office in most small country towns; but there are generally two or three banks. Nor can he increase business by making a better article than a banker down the street, or by selling his goods cheaper. He can do no more for his customers than can his rivals. His terms are the same as theirs. To do more business than the banker down the street he must wear a more attractive expression, exhibit finer manners, bear more patiently with rudeness; use the soft answer that turneth not away business; listen to the hopes of the young and the complainings of the old; exalt plain children into beauties; be plentiful of news and yet avoid gossip; subtly convey that two per cent from him is better than 10 per cent from another bank, and convince a would-be borrower that he has been refused an overdraft for his own good.

A little sycophancy will be necessary. He will, for instance, find it advisable to juggle adroitly with the weather. If Mrs. Tompkins, a valuable depositor, says it is a fine morning, why, then, it's a fine morning, though the sullen thunderclouds are piling up material for a Niagara. Five minutes later—if Mrs. Tompkins has left the office—the prudent banker will agree with the Town Clerk's more correct estimate, that the weather is threatening. A banker's weather-glass should, on being tapped by a depositor, be prepared to whirl its pointer round like the ball of a roulette table. The truth about our climate would be reserved for borrowers who are not paying off their overdrafts.

How agreeable a partner for life must the man be whose little asperities of character have been so rubbed into smoothness by the continual practice of

self-suppression. If the wife of such a man asserts that the stringy mutton she has purveyed for his dinner is spring lamb, does he harshly contradict her? No; he imagines her a valuable customer of the bank (and it will by no means diminish his happiness if he has prudently contrived that she is a valuable customer of the bank), and then swallows the mis-statement—and the muscular mutton—with a smile. Later in the meal, he will tell her that the sodden suet-pudding is blowing about his plate like foam.

### No Politics or Religion

These statements of mine may savour of flippancy, but nothing is further from my mind. Continually to simulate good-nature is to become good-natured in the end, or at least to master the difficult art of simulating good-nature. Determinedly asserting the good qualities in his customer's character, the banker comes at last to believe that the man really possesses some of them. When he has by turns become an Imperialist, a Liberal, and a broad-minded man—not too broad-minded—about Socialism, the banker perceives at last the glorious truth that all politics are vanity.

When a customer speaks to him of religion, as in Northern Ireland a customer sometimes will, he hastens to answer a question that his cashier has not asked; and returns, having learned what religion his customer belongs to. But if he be pressed into a corner about dogma, he displays a toleration that in an earlier century would have caused him to be burned by both sides.

Following this middle way of life, the bank clerk ends by becoming the best citizen in the world. He does not break the law; he pays his rates and his dog licence and his motor licence. He even pays his income tax to the uttermost farthing; such is the salutary effect of watching his customers juggling with their consciences and at the same time trying to keep himself from being involved. He does endless worrying and unpaid public service, is treasurer of this and secretary of that, and treasurer and secretary of the other; and does all this work with a cheerful countenance. He is honest to a fault; fussily honest, his wife thinks. He is scrupulously truthful; at first from policy, then from habit. While, as for secrecy, compared with a bank manager the Sphinx is a chatterbox. You might safely confide murder to him. He would take steps to prevent loss to his bank in the event of your being hanged, but, with this exception, would divulge nothing that might contribute to your suspension.

From what source do these great merits arise? From the nature of his business. The merchandise of a bank is cash. Any deficiency in cash can be checked to a penny. It must, therefore, be handled with accuracy, and accuracy

is the parent of truth. The banker cannot without difficulty and distaste be untruthful; for untruthfulness is inaccuracy, and the conscience that his occupation has slowly built up for him forbids him to be inaccurate.

### Controller of Reputations

Then, your banker is a great controller of reputations. Credit is part of the capital of his customer, and no mean part of it. Let a banker stab a customer's reputation with his pen, and the wound is mortal. The banker is therefore chary of giving opinion about his fellows, and scrupulous of forming it. Gossip is abhorrent to him. He becomes a trial to his wife in this one particular. He knows so much about his fellow-townsmen; and she knows he knows it. He knows whose vanity is making her husband spend more than he can afford. He knows what Mrs. X's fur-coat cost—he must have seen the cheque. He knows, too, how much Mrs. Robinson inherited from her late husband, and whether it is merely a life-interest. He knows whether the Smythes can really afford to keep a motor-car. Can a man truly love a woman, his wife asks herself passionately, when he knows all these juicy secrets and won't tell her?

The standard of behaviour that rules the bank clerk and the bank manager must rule the director and the general manager. They expect complete integrity and high honour from their staff. They must themselves set the example. The bank official's conscience is not worried by the casuistries of less noble businesses, the sophistries of salesmanship, the mirage-creations of advertisements, the tricks of the trade. Banking, at least in its lower walks, is the most honest business in the world. Have I not been in a bank for as many years as should have made a scoundrel of me if this were not so? I avow that in all those years I was never asked to do anything in the course of my business that might not have been declared to the world. It is no small thing to be able to say. Perhaps to possess such a standard does raise the calling of banker to the dignity of a profession.

Why do the public look askance on the owners of these shining merits? That they do so is a saddening fact. I have heard banks blamed for harshness, for timidity, for lack of public spirit. It is the reckless blame of the uninformed. Your amateur economist—and all economists are amateurs—asks with a wise-acre air why banks don't promote industry, don't go out with full hands to subsidise railways, factories, multiply shops, agriculture, and what not. The answer is: because their hands are full of other people's money. Their job is to take care of that



money for the folk who asked them to take care of it. They have no other. The chief way of doing it is to help a successful business man to be more successful. A banker is not a businessman, but a judge and assessor of businessmen's abilities.



### Values and Security

Then there is the matter of security, a ticklish affair that thins the banker's hair, especially when he comes to call the loan in. Take, for example, the security of a house. A banker very soon learns that the value of a house may bear little relation to what it cost to build. For the house that a man builds for himself is the concrete expression of his dream, and of his wife's; especially of his wife's. The more completely these dreams are realised, the less is likely to be obtained for the actuality.

Another disillusioning fact that is ultimately burned into the most young and generous-minded manager, is the three values of house-property. The first and highest value is when the house is unpledged, and the owner can sell it or not, as he likes. The second value, much lower, is when the house is pledged to a bank, and the bank is pressing the owner to sell. The owner does not disclose this fact; his wife doesn't; the bank manager certainly doesn't—for to do so would depreciate his security; the house-cat is silent. But in a small town, at any rate, the news get out. And (human nature being not what it ought to be, but what bank managers know it is), no one, since the owner is in a difficulty, will make a fair offer for the house. It sells for Price Number Two; and the banker narrowly escapes from loss. Last price of all; and lowest. The customer has come to utter financial grief, and the bank is obliged to take over the house and sell it by auction. The public knows that the bank has no use for a house; and they will let it fall to ruin sooner than not get a thief's penny of it. The bank makes a smart loss on a loan seemingly well covered.

Sometimes security takes strange forms in Northern Ireland. I knew a manager advance money on the fact that a farmer had a hardworking wife and 12 young children. But in Ulster land-hunger is a gnawing ache. Sooner than let that land pass out of the family, those 12 children stood together and worked like ants. The debt was paid off. Yet the banker took heavy risk. A widow with a young family is all motherly love and little sense of obligation.

In Northern Ireland, too, the matter-of-factness, at least of country banking, is continually seasoned with humour. We are better mixers than in other parts of the world. A humorist with a 10-pound deposit and a humorist worth 20,000 pounds are closer to each other than two dull-witted millionaires. And we are endowed with a gift of racy and unexpected speech. Some years ago, a small farmer's wife in Northern Ireland requested my cashier to give her cash

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