

which you run by compelling private collectors, commonly called Bookworms, to bring forth from their secret receptacles, stuffy libraries, and dusty presses, those dreadful old books and manuscripts which are nurseries and breeding-grounds of the most deadly microbes that menace the health of our common humanity? I would as soon open the cages marked dangerous in the Zoological Gardens and allow the ravenous beasts to range at will through the city. While those old parchments and worm-eaten tomes are securely kept under lock and key their virulent activities are restrained. They harm no one, not even their proprietors, who never read them, and if they do now and then handle them for purposes of vain display, they contract no disease because the class of persons called Bookworms are simply microbe-proof and impervious to contagion. Although they are invariably persons of means, they seldom tub or change their apparel, for disregard of every-day conventionalities is unfortunately regarded by them as one of the chief marks of literary genius. Pause, ladies and gentlemen: pause, I say, before you resurrect the dormant potentialities which have slumbered innocuously for ages in the covers and between the leaves of those volumes which I as a scientist would not, I solemnly aver, handle, except with a tongs."

It must be said that the speech of Dr. Steinbach chilled the ardor of the anti-Bookwormites. The distinguished speaker had certainly presented an aspect of the subject which was well worth serious reflection. His incisive, clear-cut sentences awakened in many a bosom the sense of self-preservation, for not a few of those present had attended lectures on hygiene, and avoided dust as they would sin, which is saying much. Mr. Notley and his supporters on the platform looked slightly apprehensive, and a subdued discussion had already begun in the audience when another speaker rose and absolutely claimed a right to be heard. He said:—

"Mr. President, ladies, and gentlemen, allow me to enter a protest and to say that those who are called by the opprobrious epithet of Bookworms are the most inoffensive members of society. Are they ever seen in riotous gatherings? Have they any predilections, political, religious, social? Are they not absorbed in the one noble passion of book-collecting? But I am not here to claim your attention, except to the social and domestic side of the subject. These gentlemen who are collectors of rare books are—let us confess it—overmastered by a hobby, or a fad, or, I will go further, by a craze. Granted. Is it not highly providential that they have such a safety valve for their superfluous energy? Deprive them of that and you throw them back on themselves without an object in life on which to concentrate their abilities. May they not have been counselled by their medical advisers to seek distraction in some congenial pursuit, lacking which, they are confronted with mental collapse or cerebral trituration, which comes to the same thing? Are not our places of public detention already overcrowded? The domestic point of view is not less appalling. The ordinary rare book collector is not by any means a clubbable *bon vivant*. He is never, never seen on a racecourse. He loathes whist-drives. Being a man of means and talent he naturally devotes himself to literature or art, in which pursuit he is warmly encouraged by his wife and daughters, who can enjoy that freedom when he is absent which his presence would inevitably mar. Indeed, it may be asserted without fear of contradiction that many young ladies fail to get suitably settled in life through having a thoroughly domestic and home-loving papa, who has an exaggerated idea of his parental duties. Does this meeting take sufficiently to heart the result of robbing a gentleman of his hobby and making him become a *bête noir*, a kill-fun, a bore to his once happy family?"

Several mammas and young ladies in the audience whose papas were often absent at literary circles seemed to feel the force of the last speaker's points.

A momentary silence—shall we term it hesitancy

—seemed to ensue, but it was broken by an intruder who felt that the proceedings were marked by an unhealthy serenity. In raucous tones he said: "As this meeting is called for the purpose of discussing books and book-buyers and sellers, may I ask for a list of those Unionist booksellers and stationers in this city and throughout Ireland who have netted small fortunes during the last twelve months by selling the books of insurgents and their photographs. Will any proceedings be taken against them by the proper authorities for thus propagating—"

The President ruled the question out of order, to the great comfort of the very cultured members of the audience. In an instant another objector, conscientious or otherwise, was on his feet. "I rise, sir," said he, in a voice like the tearing of calico, "to say that I am a private book collector. I am proud, sir, to be called a Bookworm."

A titter ran through the audience as all faces turned towards the speaker, who wore a topcoat and an anarchist's cap which partly shrouded his left eye, giving him a sinister look.

"I have listened," said he, with suppressed indignation, "to the slights that have been cast on my profession. Yes, sir, I call it a profession. You may scoff at it as a hobby or a craze. If I spent my money in horse-racing or in the gratification of convivial tastes or in elegant attire, I would be condoned. But because my predilections run in grooves unfamiliar except to the privileged few I am to be branded as a faddist. May I remark, sir, that I am an author?"

(It may be parenthetically recorded that this was true. He was guilty of a work entitled *Butterflies as Somaambulists*, 5s. The edition was partly consumed in a fire. Malicious gossip says that, on seeing a copy of his work for sale at a second-hand shop he interviewed the proprietor and brought off a remarkable coup by squaring him to mark the volume £2 10s. "very scarce." It made his name. Authors, please note.)

The indignation which swelled in the bosom of the last speaker choked his utterance, which dwindled into hoarse incoherent squeaks. A burly gentleman who had been trying to catch the president's eye several times, suddenly rose as if projected upwards by an electrified chair. "Are we not," thundered he, "trifling with the subject, merely toying with the fringe of it? Is this audience not aware that the class of persons styled Bookworms are one and all dominated in a greater or less degree by homicidal mania? They scan the 'Deaths' column of the daily papers with feverish expectancy every morning in the hope of seeing chronicled therein the demise of some literary man who has a choice library so that they may call as sympathisers and, if possible, strike a bargain for his rare books before the corpse is cold. They have been known to visit the apothecary with a view to finding out what malady some dear friend, alas! of their own is suffering from so that they may mature their plans for the acquisition of his literary heirlooms. Mr. President, ladies, and gentlemen, if I were the happy possessor of some priceless volume, I would never be so rash as to accompany a Bookworm on a lonely walk, nor would I, if even on the verge of starvation, accept food or drink from one of those dangerous members of society!" (Sensation.)

The speaker sat down and mopped his forehead, while those who sat near the little ferret-eyed man with the anarchist's cap edged away from his vicinity.

It looked bad for the Bookworms. They certainly had cause to wriggle. But ex-Professor Notley, as president of the meeting, completed their discomfiture and literally trod them under foot. He said: "Ladies and gentlemen. You have heard the engrossing subject of our deliberations threshed out in a spirit of sangfroid and fair-mindedness. This all important matter has been viewed from many standpoints—literary, social, domestic, hygienic, and homicidal. It remains for me to give the genesis of the Bookworm. This human specimen is born with the germ of acquisitiveness already highly developed. Have you ever noticed when in one of our city trams a baby in