

A Complete Story

New Books for Old

(By ALFRED J. BROWN, in the *London Month*.)

The old man who kept the second-hand bookstall in the general market has gone. Time out of mind he has kept it, living like an anchorite in his wooden cell amongst his books. He was a genuine antique dumped in a heap of modern rubbish.

On two sides of him were music-stalls, where the very latest "songs" were displayed and rendered for possible purchasers on a highly-strung piano by much more highly-strung young ladies.

On the third side of him was a coffee-stall, whose speciality was hot-pie. I verily believe the old gentleman lived solely off the odors of hot-pie which were wafted across to him, and hung like an aureole over his stall.

That he never dined off anything more substantial than the odor his cadaverous appearance would alone confirm; but a more positive proof is the fact that although I have passed his stall—or rather *not* passed it—at all hours of the day on my journeyings about the city, I have never known him to be absent or to be eating.

On the fourth side of him was another bookstall: a brand new one. Never was there such a counterfeit presentment of two "brothers." From the new stall, millions of modern novels, in jaunty jackets, grinned down at his own little dogs'-eared collection scattered about at random on the half-filled shelves.

Never a gap was to be seen in *their* ranks; they were like a regiment of gorgeously-uniformed soldiers alinged in perfect order on a barrack square. It intimidated one to pass them.

That was the great difference between the two stalls. His stall was nearly all gaps, and it was always in dire disorder; but one could *not* pass it. It was like a company of old campaigners scattered about the field after a sharp action: uniforms dusty, dirty; themselves dismembered and dishevelled.

And yet there was a charm about the old stall never to be found in the new. It was partly the charm of the unexpected. One never knew what would turn up on it.

To delve among his books was like dipping into a brantup. There was plenty of sand, certainly: the second-hand bookstall of to-day—even *his* stall—is not all gold, as, according to the older essayists, it used to be.

No, one might turn over half a dozen "remainders" which had found their way to the wrong side of the alley; or a whole edition of monstrous magazines dating back to the dark ages, which nobody but a paper merchant would buy; yet there was always *some* treasure there.

In between the rubbish there was a Volume waiting to spring into one's hand. One had only to look long enough and it would discover itself, and to see it was to surrender immediately.

It would probably cost a shilling or half-a-crown. One picked it up, and, for all the old gentleman heeded, one might walk away with it without paying at all. He was always engrossed in a book himself; or he was pottering about in his cubicle opening a fresh parcel of old books which seemed to have found their way of their own volition into his hands. Nobody ever seemed to bring them to him. How he received them was part of the mystery which surrounded him.

In his later years he began to look more and more like an old classic himself. There was that benign, quiescent appearance about his face which belongs only to venerable classics. And probably Death—that cunning Bibliophile—noted this, and claimed him for a bargain.

The Ravens opposite, cheated of his body, pounced down upon his stall and his books. That is the tragedy of it. The owners of the New stall have incorporated the Old.

This would be endurable if they had sent a company of their own raw levies to occupy it. Instead, they have invested it with sham old campaigners.

And how they have invested it!

Not a gap, not an empty shelf—not a vacant inch remains. Every niche has its sentinel. And such sentinels!

Disorder now there is none. The happy-go-lucky confusion which once characterised it has given place to a Prussian tidiness.

Poet after poet, novelist after novelist—nearly all of this century—are marshalled regularly side by side. It makes one dizzy to look at them. It is impossible to see any one of them clearly through the haze. No book cries aloud to be bought. It is a mere blur of books.

And, instead of that embodied Classic seated quietly inside, there are relays of sprightly young ladies dashing from the new stall to the old and from the old to the new without rest; and fluttering round possible purchasers with an impatient mien or an ingratiating smile which frighten any but the bravest away.

All the books are now marked in plain figures—this row at two shillings, that at five—and here is a delightful little thing by Bobbie (forsooth) Burns; shall I recite the first few bars over to you just to show you how sweetly it goes?

That is what one feels they are saying; they seem to be infected with the spirit of the adjacent music-stalls.

But they would never recapture the old clients: which is a great pity; for the market will miss the clients almost as much as they will miss the old bookseller.

They were a curious company, these clients, who seemed to have drifted into a strange land. They were mostly grey-beards—clergymen, professors, and bespectacled students—men more at home in the study than in the marketplace. Whilst they remained at the bookstall they fitted in, to some extent, with the background, and seemed part of its furniture; but when they were threading their way through the crowds of shoppers on a busy afternoon they were very decidedly out of their true sphere.

It was engaging to watch one of them quit the stall after browsing on some ethereal pabulum. "That inward eye which is the bliss of solitude" is a poor guide in a busy mart: "looks commencing with the skies" fare ill amidst the traffic of earth. More often than not the scholar would be elbowed aside by a bustling housewife laden with the spoils of her grocers, green and plain. A gross materialist, she: one could imagine what she was thinking about that old dawdler, lost in his reveries, who delayed her progress. Yet he would only hug the closer his bundle of tattered books: clinging to them more jealously than she her food for the body; as if *they* could keep him alive! She had no use for such old dry-as-dusts.

Now, at any rate, she will be able to do her shopping without stepping on the corns of a philosopher.

Which is about the best one can say for the new order of things.

Hibernian Society, Christchurch

At a recent ordinary meeting of St. Patrick's branch of the Hibernian Society, Bro. E. Fitzgerald, B.P., presided over a large attendance of members (writes our own correspondent). Bros. J. Curry (Akaroa) and W. Bulman (Morven) were tendered a cordial welcome. Motions of condolence with the relatives of the late Bros. McSwigan and Duggan were passed in the customary manner. The president referred to the golden jubilee of the society in Christchurch, which occurs in September, and to the preparations the management committee are making to fittingly celebrate the event.

The Hibernian Club, Port Chalmers

The opening meeting of the Hibernian Club at Port Chalmers, was held in the local Catholic Schoolroom on Thursday evening, the 31st ult. Bro. W. Mead, who presided, briefly explained the objects of the club, and thanked the members and visiting friends for their attendance in such large numbers. The first portion of the entertainment consisted of a euchre tournament, in charge of Bro. H. Albertson (secretary); the prize-winners being Miss C. Plunkett, Mrs. J. P. Eagar, Miss Lindsay, Mr. Brady, and Master McKewen. During an interval Misses Craig and Hart (members of the executive committee), assisted by lady members of the club, served refreshments. An enjoyable musical programme was then rendered, and included community singing under the direction of Mr. F. Pennington; pianoforte duets by the Misses Lindsay and the Masters Monti; and a pianoforte selection by Mr. Pennington. At the conclusion of the evening's entertainment, the chairman very sincerely thanked the ladies who had prepared and served the supper, and those who had given such pleasing musical items. The club has now entered upon what is hoped will be a prosperous and useful career.