

The history of the book war : fair book prices versus Publishers' Trust prices / [Times Book Club].

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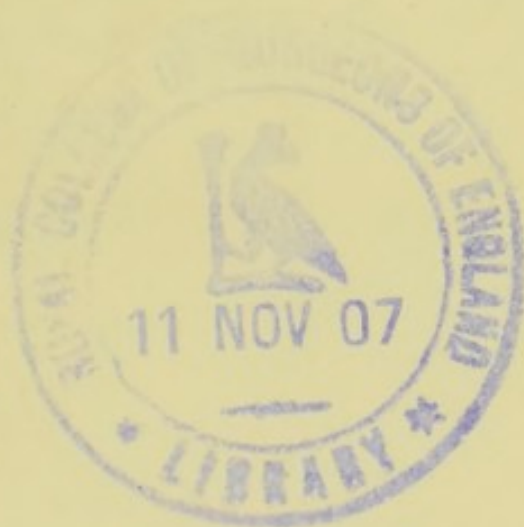
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THE HISTORY OF THE ⁽¹²⁾
BOOK WAR

FAIR BOOK PRICES

VERSUS

PUBLISHERS' TRUST PRICES



LONDON

The Times

1907

BOOK IV

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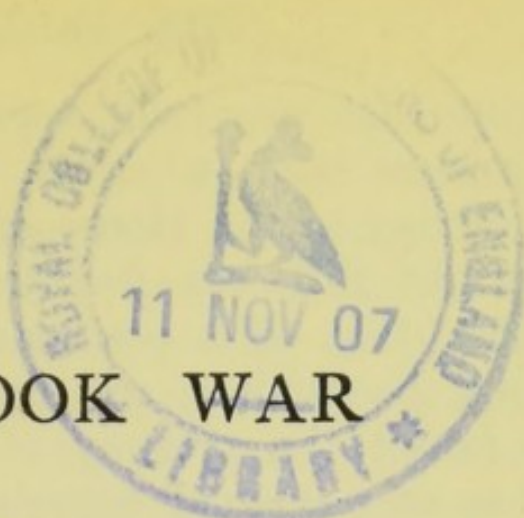


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THE BOOK WAR

I

INTRODUCTORY

THE struggle provoked by the concerted attack of the publishers upon *The Times* Book Club has now been going on for nearly a year. It is still going on, though less noisily than before, and indeed it is difficult to say when it will end, if we have regard to the remoter consequences of throwing the leaven of new ideas into the book trade. But now that the incoherent shouting of unexamined prejudice has died down, and a great quantity of adventitious matter has been got rid of, a connected account of the substantial issues and the real course of the fight may be useful to many who perhaps retain only somewhat fragmentary and confused impressions.

It may be well to take a preliminary glance at the *status quo ante*. When *The Times* Book Club was started the publishing trade was, in all essential respects, precisely what it became in the reign of Queen Anne. In that reign the first Copyright Act was passed by the legislature, which fondly believed itself to be giving protection and encouragement to authors. The effect of that and subsequent amending Acts was, however, to give protection to publishers—

a point that was fully appreciated by Lord Camden sixty years later, when an important copyright case was carried to the House of Lords, and a Booksellers Copyright Bill was defeated mainly by his efforts. Against that Bill petitions were presented by the country booksellers, and by the Glasgow booksellers, who feared the tyranny of the London trade, then aiming at perpetual copyright. The effect of giving booksellers, or publishers as we now call them, a perpetual freehold in books, was forcibly summed up by Camden, in words prophetic of what has actually been accomplished with a terminable copyright as regards all but books that outlive the period. He said: "All our learning will be locked up in the hands of the Tonsons and Lintons of the age, who will set that price for it their avarice chooses to demand, till the public become their slaves as much as their hackney compilers now are. Instead of salesmen the booksellers of late years have forestalled the market and become engrossers." That was the effect of the limited copyright of 8 Anne, c. 19, operating upon a prior state of things, in which practically all MSS. were in the hands of bookseller-publishers. Before that Act was passed the author had no choice but to sell his manuscript for cash, and had no further interest in the book from a monetary point of view. If the book did not sell very well, there was no temptation to piracy. If it sold well, at a price much above the cost of production, there was a temptation for another bookseller to go to the expense of composing, printing, binding, and publishing it afresh. In this lay the security of the public. Excessive prices were always liable to be cut down by competition.

The weak point was that the competitors were not upon an equal footing. One had paid the author for the contents of the book; the other had not. The real problem was to retain the competition, and to place all competitors upon the equal footing of having to pay royalty to the author. Unfortunately the royalty system was not practised at that time. Booksellers, as we have said, bought manuscripts outright, and took the risks of publication. The records of Stationers' Hall for that period show that practically all manuscripts were the property of booksellers. But the property itself was of a kind not recognised by the common law. Protection of that property from pillage had to be secured by special legislation, and legislation aimed at securing it by giving copyright to the author. It was of no use to the author who had sold his manuscript; but it was of great use to the bookseller who had bought. The effect upon authors who produced books after the enactment of the new statute was curious and probably unforeseen. They were endowed with rights which were saleable apart from the property, whereas previously they had nothing to sell except possession of the manuscript. It at once became possible for a speculator to take a book on lease instead of buying it outright. He could pay a rent directly; or he could resort to the profit-sharing system sometimes adopted in the case of land; or he could agree to pay a percentage of the gross receipts, now called a royalty. He no longer needed to employ capital in buying the book; while in bargaining with an author in any of the ways mentioned, he had the immense advantage that always belongs to a man of business dealing with an amateur. These facilities

gradually evolved a special class of publishers out of the general body of booksellers who published, and that class by superior business aptitude, by the possession of capital, and by being dealers in many books while the author dealt only with one, steadily reduced the authors to subjection. Copyright, intended ostensibly as a protection for authors, actually placed them in a worse position than before, as is proved by the large number of books that pay the publishers well although the authors get nothing, or may even be heavily out of pocket. That at least was impossible in the old non-copyright days. Authors did not give their manuscripts away, as hundreds do to-day. They always got something; and the sums they received, though small as we count money, were quite as substantial as the remuneration of most authors at the present time, if regard be had to the immense depreciation of the money standard during the last two hundred years.

It is significant that every change in the law of copyright down to the last audacious attempt in the United States legislature has been promoted by publishers and not by authors. Since it successfully appropriated the protection intended for authors, and converted it into an engine for their enslavement, the publishing trade, long since differentiated from the parent bookselling trade, has been steadily engaged in tightening the bonds in which it holds alike authors, booksellers, and the public. Its domination has now reached that point of completeness which in human affairs is not infrequently the precursor of collapse. It now advances pretensions to that perpetual copyright, involving control of the price of books from

their issue to their physical decay, which only the House of Lords prevented from being established in 1775. It arrogates to itself, as against the author, the right to deal with his property as it pleases, to deny him access to true accounts in which he is directly interested, to sell his book or suppress it at will, and to rob him of readers and reputation, as and when it thinks fit. As against the public it arrogates the right to ignore the growing demand for books, and the clamant need for the education they give, and to maintain the prices of books at a wholly fictitious level, in order that publishers may conduct their business upon the lines dear to short-sighted and unprogressive monopolists.

Fifty years ago there was an attempt to break through the cast-iron regulations of the publishers. A few booksellers rather more enterprising than their fellows, claimed the right to sell books at less than the prescribed price. It was their own affair entirely. They did not pay the publishers one penny less, but simply contented themselves with a smaller profit. They did good to the publishers by bringing in a certain percentage of new customers, who but for the reduction would not have bought at all. In the arrogance begotten of irresponsible power, the publishers made a fierce resistance, led by the Longman and the Murray of the period. They affected to see in the new departure the ruin of themselves and of the booksellers who obeyed their behests. The innovators were assailed with the vituperation of offended self-love, and with the more formidable weapon of ostracism. The eminent authors of the day were appealed to and gave an unequivocal verdict in

favour of the progressive booksellers. These authors were eminent in a different fashion from the popular novelists of the hour who have espoused the cause of the publishers in this contest. They were men who powerfully influenced the thought and even the public policy of their day, men whose works must be carefully studied by any one who desires to know contemporary England or to understand the origins of forces still potent, men whose books are still alive and whose names are household words. Among them were Babbage, Carlyle, Darwin, Dickens, Grote, Kingsley, G. H. Lewes, Cornwall Lewis, Macaulay, J. S. Mill, Milman, F. W. Newman, Goldwin Smith, Herbert Spencer, Tennyson, and Whewell. In the most emphatic manner they affirmed that a publisher has no right to attempt, after getting his price for a book, to dictate to any buyer at what price he shall resell; and that it is entirely advantageous to the author when the selling-price is reduced by the retailer, as it is beyond all controversy advantageous to the public. These distinguished men carried public opinion so thoroughly with them that the publishers were constrained to submit the question to a court of arbitration composed of Lord Campbell, Milman, and Grote, the finding of which completely vindicated the "solitary upstarts" who had rebelled against the dictation of the publishers and the stupid party among the booksellers. The consequence of that verdict was that for half a century the public enjoyed the advantage, upon the whole, of a reduction of about one-fourth upon the prices, even then unjustifiably high, of books which cost more to produce than they do to-day. It is worth noting by the way that by the statute of Anne any one

who thought the price of a copyright book "too high and unreasonable," could complain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, the Bishop of London, the chiefs of the three courts at Westminster, to several other high authorities, or even to "the rector of the College of Edinburgh in Scotland," who were empowered to fix a reasonable price. When a generation arose that had forgotten the struggle of 1852, and the safeguard provided by the Copyright Act itself, the publishers proceeded to steal back what they had been compelled to relinquish. They made books into two classes, one subject to discount and the other not subject. The end of the wedge was made thin by publishing at first only an occasional book of the second class, which they called net. But in the last few years the number has rapidly increased, and the intention obviously is to bring all books under the net system. In other words, the publishers are arbitrarily adding to the prices of books the percentage taken off by the decision of Lord Campbell and his coadjutors in 1852; and at the same time reasserting the right which the eminent authors of that day strenuously denied, to dictate to the purchaser of a book on what terms he shall dispose of it afterwards.

The publishers invariably fight under cover of some hypocritical pretence of anxiety for the well-being of some other class. When they charge the public seven or eight times what a book costs, they profess solicitude for authors, but take care to put the money in their own pockets. When they publish at net prices they pretend to be acting solely in the interests of the booksellers. It has been shown in the articles on Publishers' Practice printed in *The Times*, that the small book-

seller, whose woes are prominent in their arguments, gets little or nothing out of the net book system; and that while a few large booksellers get something to keep them quiet, they do not get nearly so much of the plunder as the publishers keep for themselves. These propositions and the figures on which they are based have not been disputed by the publishers, though they have not shown themselves indisposed to be vocal when they think they can make out a case. The net book system is simply an audacious attempt to filch from the public the advantage they gained half a century ago, and to do this for the benefit neither of author nor of bookseller but for that of the publishers alone.

Thus the publishing system of to-day is practically that of two hundred years ago, consolidated and fortified by the organisation of the publishers into a close ring or trust. Although cost of materials has fallen very greatly, and ingenious machinery turns out cheaply what had formerly to be produced expensively by hand labour, the general range of prices, notwithstanding the disappearance of the three-volume novel, is higher than ever. Take as an illustration the book that was the cause of the controversy in 1852—Macaulay's "History of England"—and compare it with a book which has prominently figured in the present controversy—the "Life of Lord Randolph Churchill." The two volumes of the History contained a larger quantity of reading matter than the two volumes of the Life, and that matter was of immensely higher interest and more permanent value. Yet the two volumes of the History were published at 32s., those of the Life at 36s.; the History was sold to the public by permission of the

publishers at 29s., and by the progressive booksellers at 26s.; while for the Life the public had to pay the full 36s., because it was marked "net." The larger book, the incomparably more valuable book, was obtainable by the reader fifty-five years ago for ten shillings less than was charged last year for the smaller, the less valuable, and the ephemeral production. It would be easy to multiply proofs that the general scale of prices has risen in face of a falling cost of production. There is one department which is an exception, but it is an exception that proves the rule. Non-copyright books are reproduced at one-fourth of the price of the ordinary novel, and would still be less than half that price if they were charged with a shilling a copy royalty. Copyright books would be equally cheap if, while compelled to furnish a royalty for the author, they were equally open to free competition in publishing. But a publishing system entrenched behind a monopoly created by misdirected copyright legislation, opposes stubborn resistance to every attempt to bring books within the reach of the vast public educated by modern effort to desire them. That is the system with which *The Times* Book Club unexpectedly came into collision.

II

HOW THE WAR BEGAN

To say that the collision was unexpected is to describe very inadequately the astonishment caused by the suddenly developed hostility of the publishers. When the Book Club was projected, the publishers were placed in possession in the fullest manner of every detail connected with its organisation, aims, and methods. They were not only taken into confidence, they were also taken into council. The leading members of the Publishers' Trust hailed the scheme with delight, and some of them were forward in making business suggestions intended to perfect its methods and promote its success. They saw in it a means of greatly increasing the demand for their books, nor did they conceal what it would indeed have been idle to attempt to conceal, that the publishing trade was rather badly in need of some stimulus of the kind. Mr. Heinemann, addressing a trade conference in Milan in June 1906, gave striking testimony on this point. He said: "Our English retail trade has for long been in an inactive and negligent state notwithstanding the fact that we have established a net selling price, so that the retail trade is protected against all unfair competition and under-selling." Of course Mr. Heinemann does not see that to prevent all competition between one tradesman and another is just the way to reduce the trade to stagnation

and to make its members what he describes them as being—"jealously prejudiced against new ideas." But that is not the point just now. The point is that Mr. Heinemann, who is in a position to know, bears witness to the fact of stagnation which had endured "for long." Nor is he the only witness by any means. He merely told the publishers of Europe what the leading publishers at home freely confessed and lamented in a more private manner (what Mr. E. Bell, President of the Publishers' Association, said for publishers and Mr. Keay as president said for the associated booksellers). What is the retail trade but the channel through which publishers dispose of their wares? If that channel is choked, then the publishers themselves must suffer. They were suffering, they had been suffering "for long," hence their pleasure at the starting of the Book Club. It was subsequently pretended that the Book Club had extorted an extra discount, but the publishers have never been able to explain by what means the Book Club could practise extortion upon their well-organised body. The discount was in fact spontaneously surrendered by the Book Club as it was originally spontaneously given by the publishers. It was merely a crowning evidence of the delight with which they hailed the scheme at its inception, and of the thoroughness with which they then believed that a new and energetic agency of circulation and distribution could not but benefit the publishing business. Such was the benevolent and actively helpful attitude of the publishers when the Book Club began its operations. Had their attitude been different it would never have come into existence at all.

The promoters of the Book Club believed just as

thoroughly as the publishers that its necessarily large purchases and large advertising would directly furnish a powerful stimulus to the book trade, and that the indirect benefits would be of equal value. They anticipated that the sight of a large body of subscribers enjoying advantages never before placed at public disposal would excite the interest and curiosity of the book-reading world, would stimulate book-buying generally, and would in no long time call forth imitators of Book Club methods. At that time the serious defects of the publishing system had not become prominent, nor had occasion arisen to investigate publishers' methods. The projectors of the Book Club were not crusaders or Quixotic reformers, but simply men of business seeking a perfectly intelligible and frankly avowed business end. They were quite content to take things as they found them, and to work cordially with the publishers upon lines which they and the publishers alike believed to be mutually advantageous.

The publishers, however, changed their minds. It is quite impossible to say when the change began, because their proceedings were shrouded in a veil of reticence, secrecy, and duplicity. At the best, people incur a heavy responsibility when they withdraw from undertakings and understandings on the faith of which others have spent large sums of money and entered into onerous engagements. The very least they can do is to behave with perfect frankness and straightforwardness, to state explicitly and at the earliest possible moment the grounds of their discontent, and to give every possible opportunity for the removal by negotiation of their tardily discovered objections. The Publishers' Trust behaved in a diametrically opposite manner. They did

not disclose their dissatisfaction, but on the contrary, maintained the show of constancy and of friendship while secretly intriguing and conspiring against the Book Club. Not long after it began its operations, a campaign of detraction started in various quarters, having no discoverable interest in any questions that might arise between it and the publishers. Not much attention was paid to these anonymous outpourings, which were capable of explanation as due to professional jealousy or to simple eagerness to make copy. In the light of later events, it is not unreasonable to connect the Publishers' Trust with these apparently irresponsible attacks. On April 30th of last year the Publishers' Trust inquired whether the managers of the Book Club would be prepared "to discuss with the respective presidents of the Publishers' Association and the Associated Booksellers the whole question of the supply of new and second-hand books, with the view of arriving at an amicable arrangement." This was the first intimation that in the eyes of the publishers there was anything to discuss. So far as was known at the Book Club it had been acting all the time on the basis of an understanding alike amicable and complete with the Publishers' Trust. The supply of new and second-hand books was the foundation of the whole undertaking. The publishers had professed themselves not only ready but eager to supply new books in any desired quantity, and upon exceptionally favourable terms. It was clearly understood that the more books the Book Club bought, the better the publishers would be pleased, while publishers themselves were forward to point out that only by buying books in unprecedented quantities could a substantial improvement be effected upon the very

unsatisfactory practice of the old lending libraries. It was obvious and was admitted on all hands that extensive buying could not go on without extensive selling. Hence the question of second-hand books had to be carefully gone into and amicably settled before the Book Club scheme could be proceeded with. When does a book become second-hand? — was the first question to be definitely settled. It was settled in November 1905, in the following explicit declaration by the publishers: "We welcome your definition of a second-hand book as being one which has been used by more than two subscribers, and is returned in such a state that it cannot be sold as a new book." The letter in which that declaration occurs bears the signatures of Reginald Smith, President; W. Heinemann, Vice-President; C. J. Longman, Treasurer; John Murray, ex-President; and Frederick Macmillan, ex-President; all of the Publishers' Association. Nothing could be more clear, nothing could be more binding. The declaration was not even wrung from reluctant signatories. These eminent persons "welcomed" the agreement proposed by the Book Club, which for its part naturally supposed them to possess that authority to act for the Publishers' Association which was subsequently repudiated in an official letter from the secretary of that remarkable body. It was therefore not a little surprising to the Book Club to learn on April 30, 1906, when it had been carrying on business for six months on the basis of this agreement, that there was need in the eyes of the publishers for a meeting with the object of reaching "an amicable arrangement."

However, the meeting took place on May 9th. The definition of a second-hand book was not called in

question. On the contrary Mr. C. J. Longman, then Vice-President, said in presence of Mr. Bell, the President of the Publishers' Association, and of Mr. Keay, the President of the Associated Booksellers: "We as publishers entirely accept your definition." Nor was there any question of imposing a time-limit. The Book Club had a right, which was not called in question at the meeting, to sell second-hand any book which had been so much used as not to be saleable as a new book, and to do this at any period, however short, after the date of publication. This is a point which it is important to bear in mind, since otherwise the subsequent controversy becomes unintelligible. It is accordingly a point which has been assiduously confused with other points for controversial purposes. The discussion on May 9th turned upon a totally different question, namely, the disposal of "dead stock." That expression means new and unsoiled copies of books in possession of a retailer for which there is no longer any demand at the published price. The demand may cease within a month. There may never have been any demand at all. What is the man to do who has bought from the publisher books which the public will not buy? The Book Club may have, and has had, books on hand which nobody wants even to borrow. They accordingly cannot become second-hand under the definition. What is to be done with them? The Book Club held that a cessation of demand converts the stock into "dead stock," and that it ought to be free to sell the books for what they will fetch. The view of the publishers was that, however dead the demand may be, a net book cannot be officially "dead stock" until six months have elapsed from the date of publication, and that it may not be

sold at less than the published price until then. It is highly probable that such a book will not sell for anything but waste paper after six months, but the retailer must bear the loss. After discussion on this point, it was proposed as a compromise that when the Book Club held stock which it considered dead because nobody wanted to buy or borrow it, the publishers who persisted in regarding it as alive should prove the strength of their belief by taking the stock off the hands of the Book Club. If the publishers did not want the books at what they charged for them any more than the public wanted them at the published price, then they were to be sold by the Book Club for anything they would fetch in the market. This was finally accepted by the publishers, and the meeting separated on the understanding that the matter was thus settled, subject to the ratification of the Associated Booksellers, whose president, though present as a plenipotentiary, declined to bind his fellow-tradesmen. This might perhaps have been regarded as a bad omen, but the whole discussion had been so friendly, and the difficulties had, to all appearance, been so readily overcome, that the representatives of the Book Club were not suspicious. Supposing themselves to be dealing with honourable men, whose word was as good as their bond, they renewed their old engagements and entered into a large number of new ones. Nor did anything happen for close upon three months which could have conveyed to the most vigilant the smallest hint that the agreement of May 9th was not complete and final.

To assume that the publishers were consciously and deliberately insincere at that meeting might be to fail in

charity and to overrate their histrionic ability. There are no means of knowing what passed afterwards between them and the booksellers. It is, however, reasonable to surmise that the booksellers said in effect: By this compromise you are practically allowing the Book Club to buy books on sale or return, therefore we ought to have the same privilege. The publishers may have taken fright at the prospect of selling all their books on these terms. Or the booksellers may have gone on to say that they did not want such terms because a door would be opened to that abominable competition which they are so anxious to exclude from the book trade, and eventually to the lowering of the prices of books which publishers are equally anxious to avoid. Then there would have been nothing for it but a combination of publishers and booksellers against the Book Club and the public, the basis of which would necessarily be the withdrawal by the publishers of the concessions they had made to the Book Club. This, of course, is merely a conjectural account of what took place, based upon the prejudices and modes of action of the two sets of men concerned; but it seems the only conjecture that can relieve the publishers of the odium of predetermined and deliberate treachery. Neither this nor any other conjecture can, however, avail to justify or excuse the profound silence they maintained for three months, during which they allowed the Book Club to act upon an agreement which the publishers knew that they had no intention of observing. It was not until July 30th that the mask was dropped; and the meeting, the amicable discussion, the candour, the sweet reasonableness, the complete though unsigned agreement, were shown to be merely the elements of

an elaborate and impudent trick. These three months had been spent by the eminent, the dignified, and the honourable members of the Publishers' Trust in active but profoundly secret negotiations with the Associated Booksellers, and with the egregious self-elected committee that mismanages the affairs of the Society of Authors, having for their object to deliver a concerted, and it was fondly hoped, a crushing attack upon the Book Club. Without a word of warning, without a hint that the agreement of May 9th was not held binding, without giving any opportunity for discussion or compromise, the publishers declared war. On July 30th they launched an ultimatum demanding instant and unconditional acceptance of terms then made known for the first time, and surrender of the rights of sale clearly secured to the Book Club by the preliminary discussions and by the subsequent agreement.

For the benefit of those who are not versed in the technicalities of the book trade, it may be well to explain, a little more in detail, just what this means. The old lending libraries, as every one knows who has had to do with them, carried economy of books to the farthest point. When a book was new and in demand, they bought a number of copies quite inadequate for the number of their subscribers. Consequently a man might put it at the head of his list week after week for many weeks without getting a copy to read. Thus one copy was made to do duty for a great many subscribers. Not only so, but after its vogue was past it went on doing duty by being foisted upon people who asked for some newer book which was denied them. This process went on until books became shabby, dirty, and dog-eared. Now it is obvious that a library which

works its books so hard as this cannot do much in the way of selling them. It takes everything out of them in circulation, and by the time they are done with they are many months, perhaps a year, old, and are at once out of date and physically repulsive. *The Times* Book Club went upon a totally different principle. It aimed at letting every member have a new book as soon as he asked for it. That meant satisfying in three or four weeks a demand which the old libraries spread over six or eight months. It meant also that books which people had ceased to ask for were not shoved into the hands of those who wanted something else. Consequently *The Times* Book Club had to buy a great many more copies of a popular book, in proportion to the number of its subscribers, than the old libraries did; it satisfied the borrowing demand very much faster; and at the end of a month it had on hand a large stock of copies barely distinguishable from new ones, in excess of the number that would suffice for the belated borrowers. It is perfectly obvious that under a system of this kind the sale of second-hand copies at a comparatively early date after publication becomes of dominant importance. The accumulation of copies useless for circulating purposes at the end of a month, and unsaleable at the end of six months, would swamp any enterprise, however wealthy.

Now the ultimatum of July 30th did not merely destroy the understanding about the sale of "dead stock" arrived at on May 9th. That alone would have been bad enough and dishonourable enough after allowing three months to pass without a single indication that any dissatisfaction existed. But the ultimatum did much worse. It destroyed the agree-

ment of November 1905 concerning second-hand books, the agreement which the publishers "welcomed," the agreement which in May they again endorsed in set terms, the agreement on the faith of which the Book Club was founded. The second clause of the undertaking, which the Book Club was required to sign with the pistol at its head, ran thus: "Not to offer for sale or sell any second-hand copy of any such net book at less than the published price within six months of publication." No time-limit had ever before been placed upon second-hand books as defined in the manner welcomed by the publishers. They fully realised in November 1905 that the Book Club as then projected could not go on if such a limit were enforced. This clause was therefore a blow struck at the vitals of the Book Club. It was to be compelled, under its engagements, to buy copies enough of every book, to satisfy the demands of its members immediately after publication. The copies that had passed through their hands, and could no longer be offered as new at full price, were to lie idle upon the shelves for four or five months before they could be sold or even offered for sale in any way. The calculation is pretty obvious. On the strength of assurances given by the publishers the Book Club had bound itself to purchase large numbers of books for a temporary purpose, hoping to resell at a not too ruinous reduction. By stopping the resale the publishers hoped to make these large purchases a net addition to their sales, while the booksellers hoped to be happily rid of a troublesome competitor. The Book Club was to be the milch cow of the publishers on one hand, while on the other it was not to be allowed to interfere with the drowsy ineptitude of the booksellers,

or with the plunder of the public by exorbitant charges.

To an attack of this kind there could be only one reply. Not only did the publishers strike at what they well knew to be the essential condition of existence for a library aiming at giving every subscriber the book when asked for, but they took every care to make the manner of their demand so offensive as to render negotiation impossible. Insolent repudiation of the agreement by which they had encouraged the expenditure of large sums of money was in itself bad enough. It was rendered worse by the studious withholding of any alternative agreement on the part of the publishers. They bound themselves to nothing in the event of their demands being conceded. When challenged to frame at least a bilateral agreement which might offer some kind of finality, they declared themselves unable to do anything of the kind. The Trust, so powerful for aggression, was represented as unable to secure the adhesion of any one of its members to any treaty of peace. That cynical avowal, officially made, was another mine sprung upon the Book Club at the last moment. Had the publishers made it in the autumn of 1905, things would naturally have followed a different course. It is plain that on July 30th the publishers had determined upon aggression, and that the Book Club had only to choose in what way it would meet the attack. There was no hesitation on that point. The Book Club chose to take it fighting. No doubt the publishers thought that the other alternative was unavoidable, and their angry surprise was somewhat ludicrous. They had not really considered the fighting alternative at all, and they were not prepared for

resistance, though they had so carefully prepared the attack. They had so high an idea of their own importance, and of the might before which authors tremble, that they anticipated quite an easy capture of an unusually rich booty.

At the end of the autumn holidays the publishers put their coercive machinery in motion. That is to say, they proclaimed a general boycott of the Book Club, and withdrew their advertisements from *The Times*. By the second measure they acquired for a time a good many vociferous defenders in the press, who, however, soon wearied of their disinterested efforts, when the new allocation of advertisement favours was settled. The boycott meant that the publishers refused to sell their books to the Book Club at trade prices, refused to sell to wholesale agents whom they suspected of supplying the Book Club, and finally, with the aid of the booksellers, endeavoured to prevent the Book Club from buying books at all, even at full retail prices. These quaint mediæval proceedings produced a considerable effect for a time. They made it difficult for the Book Club to get the books it wanted, but there was the incidental disadvantage that they made it equally difficult for the publishers to get the money of which they were equally in need. The orders from the Book Club which the publishers refused were somehow not replaced, as they probably expected, by equivalent orders from other quarters. No great stimulus appears to have been given to the general book trade by the closure of the market to one large buyer. In fact, if one may judge from the windows of some dignified booksellers in town, they have had to put much of their dignity into their pockets, and to resort to

methods which insular self-sufficiency is apt to describe as American. Other indications even more trustworthy, though less patent to the wayfaring man, induce the belief that the small booksellers, so greatly cherished by the publisher for their lavish display of his wares, have not been inundating him with orders. Efforts to preserve that precious "life of a book" which consists in its repose in the publisher's cellar, appear to have been in a good many cases only too successful. Yet, strange as it must appear to the mediæval publisher, the Book Club has more than doubled its sales under the boycott.

One capital mistake made by the publishers was that they enormously underrated the intelligence of the members of the Book Club. It was undoubtedly an important, if not the most important, part of their calculations that by cutting off the supply of books they would sow dissension between the Book Club and its members. The publishers were quite unprepared alike for the rapidity with which the members grasped the facts of the controversy, and for the generous forbearance they showed when they saw the Book Club involved in difficulties which were not of its own creation. A direct appeal for their opinions showed that by a majority, so large as practically to amount to unanimity, they approved the course taken by the Book Club, and deeply resented the action of the publishers as a direct injury to themselves. Before that appeal was made it was evident that they were spontaneously abstaining from asking for books brought out by the known enemies of the Book Club, and their abstention became more marked when they were invited to assist the Book Club in that way, and were

furnished with indications enabling them to make their assistance more effective. Their discrimination extended from borrowing to purchasing, and a good many authors have suffered in pocket and in reputation for the unfortunate blindness that caused them to take sides with their oppressors against those who would have promoted their emancipation. The dulness of many authors is all the more remarkable when we remember that the main contentions of the Book Club are identical with those put forth by the intelligent founders of the Society of Authors, now so sadly fallen from its first high estate.

III

THE CAMPAIGN

WHEN the publishers broke off business relations with *The Times* and the Book Club they did not do the thing in a corner. They called heaven and earth to witness. They wrote articles in magazines explaining what splendid fellows they are, what priceless benefits they have conferred upon literature and upon the nation, how hard is their task, how tremendous are their risks, how indomitable is the public spirit that sustains them in face of base ingratitude, how modest are their rewards, and how absolutely just and necessary is every detail of their trade practices. They wrote letters to the newspapers to show that a stern sense of duty to the public, to the authors, and to generations yet unborn compelled them to resist to the very death the obnoxious institution which, a year before, they had welcomed as a heaven-sent ally. They laid themselves out to cause the flesh of the public to creep by lurid pictures of a deep-laid and far-reaching plot to establish an all-embracing monopoly upon the ruin of publishers, authors, and booksellers. They made the whole country ring with dismal predictions, with whining appeals, and with variegated objurgations. For some time they maintained a truly Ephesian hubbub, in which the voice of reason was drowned in random denunciation of an intruder daring enough not to fall down before

their shrines. The booksellers joined in the clamour, and wrung the hearts of the sentimental with harrowing descriptions of the universal ruin impending over them. Some authors suddenly discovered that publishers are their true and disinterested friends. The curled darlings of the fiction market came forth from the lotos-land through the looking-glass where they dwell withdrawn from the vulgar bustle of commerce, or emerged from the vaporous private Utopias wherein they excogitate phosphorescent millenniums. In tones perhaps more shrill than the world expected to issue from these oracular retreats, they proclaimed at once their disinterested devotion to literature, their contempt for vulgar rewards, and their unbounded indignation at a reduction of their profits, which, on the mere asseveration of the publishers, they believed to be imminent. They waxed eloquent about the dignity of literature in lucubrations which, to the mere layman, appeared singularly lacking in dignity of any kind, and which lost greatly in impressiveness from the constant appraisement of dignity in coin of the realm. The attitude of some authors was, in fact, one of the most curious points in the whole controversy, but an investigation of its causes would take us too far. It may, however, be said generally that the vociferous defenders of the established system were authors popular enough to exact fairly good terms from the publishers, while their less fortunate brethren, who have no escape from publishers' extortion, had strong prudential reasons for keeping silence.

Apart from these noisy demonstrations, the contributions of the publishers to the polemic they had started were neither important nor effective. They dealt largely

in predictions of the ruin which would overtake alike authors, booksellers, and themselves if the Book Club was allowed to carry on its operations. But they evaded all invitations to show by figures that any damage had actually been suffered by the trade. In fact there was a little boasting at the meeting of the Publishers' Association about the satisfactory results of the year 1906; the boasters having characteristically forgotten that for nine months of that year the Book Club had carried on its operations unchecked and unhindered. Fortunately knowledge of the truth does not depend upon the interested statements of publishers. Paper-makers, printers, and bookbinders are all excellent judges of the condition of the publishing trade, and their testimony established the fact that no one had been injured by the Book Club, while many had derived marked benefit from the stimulus it gave. They have subsequently had to bemoan the loss of trade due to the hostile interference of the publishers with the Book Club.

The publishers relied upon an *a priori* argument, which they repeated in a hundred forms and with ceaseless iteration. Setting experience aside, they maintained that the sale at a reduced price of copies "almost as good as new" will prevent the sale of new copies. In other words, they argued that a man who wants a book such as he is accustomed to buy at 4s. 6d. will abstain from buying it if a friend, who is a member of the Book Club, has been able to buy a second-hand copy for 3s. 11d. The publishers, however, do not care for concrete cases of this kind. They prefer the safer ground of vague generalities, where it is easier to put the cause for the effect and the effect for cause. In ordinary circumstances it is no doubt true that when a

thing is on sale at a reduced price it is not selling very briskly at the full price. But it is not the reduced price that kills the sale at full price; it is the absence of sales at full price which compels sellers to offer the thing at a reduction. No one sells for less than he could get if he knows it. The fact of reduction is the proof of a languid demand. The publishers put the cart before the horse, and argue in effect that reduction of price destroys demand.

Suppose that a new book is brought out by an author who usually sells 4000 copies at the ordinary price. There is an effective demand for that number of copies. Now suppose that the Book Club takes 1000 copies, circulates them, and sells them to the last copy—a thing which does not happen in practice, but represents the extreme case for the publishers. These thousand copies satisfy only one-fourth of the demand, and there remain 3000 buyers who get the book upon the terms they have been accustomed to, just as if the Book Club had no existence. The publisher has had his full price without deduction. It includes the full remuneration of the author, and if that remuneration does not reach him it is not the fault of the Book Club. But there is more than this. By circulating its thousand copies while the book is new and being talked about, the Book Club places it in the hands of thousands of people who otherwise might never have heard of it, or who would have awaited the good pleasure of an old circulating library. In many cases they would have lost all interest in it before it reached them, and would never have thought of buying it at full price. Many do buy at the reduced price, and that fact stimulates the Book Club to buy larger numbers of the next book than it

would otherwise have asked for. Thus, far from killing demand the Book Club increases it, and sells large numbers of books which would not otherwise have been sold at all. That is what actually happened during the first half of 1906. But the publishers apparently thought they could do better still, and that, as the eggs were golden, the dead goose would be a gold mine. They seem to have calculated in their shortsighted way that the Book Club would have to buy just as many of their books, whether it could sell them or not, and that by preventing the sale they could add its purchases to the undiminished buying from other quarters. Study of their ledgers for the first half of 1907 will show them that there was some flaw in that calculation, and will, perhaps, suggest that honesty is not the worst policy even in publishing.

After the controversy became acute the Book Club opened up the question of the huge disproportion between the cost of producing books and the prices at which they are published. That made the publishers extremely angry. They took the line of blustering a good deal and of charging the Book Club with raising the question as a mere afterthought to bolster up its case. That was feeble policy, because it ignored the substantial accusation altogether. If books are unjustifiably dear, it is mere petulance to say that the Book Club states the fact as an afterthought. The statement might indeed have been postponed had the publishers stood by their initial agreement with the Book Club, because *The Times* had no wish to stir up strife. But the fact that books are too dear came into prominence at an early period of the Club's operations. It was quickly discovered that there is a very large public

ready to buy books which boggles at their excessive cost; and that when everything had been done to cheapen distribution the prices still remained prohibitive. Printers' estimates, and common-sense deductions from market quotations, are within the reach of every one, and it needed nothing more to show that in some way the price of books is habitually inflated to eight or nine times the cost of production. Further inquiry of no very recondite character showed that the authors get a quite modest share of this heavy loading, and in too many cases no share that is appreciable. The conclusion inevitably followed that the bulk of the excessive price goes to the publishers and booksellers, and it was found that the publishers secure the lion's share. These facts having been established, an inquiry into the whole working of the publishing system naturally followed, and the results were set forth in a series of articles published in *The Times*. It is easy to understand that they were not agreeable to the publishers, who, however, did not dare to question their accuracy. Their appearance, in fact, produced an extraordinary and universal silence on the other side, contrasting strangely with the tumultuous volubility of a somewhat earlier stage. It was almost as if a well-drilled host had suddenly received the order to cease firing and had obeyed as one man.

It was shown that the publishers, though not formally constituted as a trust—a thing perhaps rendered unnecessary by the circumstance that each book published is a separate and self-contained monopoly—are nevertheless so solidly organised that they act as against all outsiders with the unanimity and precision of a trust. They indeed have their internal rivalries

and jealousies, and they compete with one another for the richer morsels of the trade. But their competition, though it may be of some advantage to a few popular authors, never extended so far as to affect their general methods or their accepted standards of price to the public. So confident were they of their power, that one publisher on being told that they were wrong, and that the public would not indefinitely stand their exactions, replied: "We are too well organised to be beaten, and the public have nothing to do but simply to pay what we ask." If he had added that authors have simply to be thankful for what they get, and that the Book Club had simply to yield whatever the publishers demand, he would have spoken the whole mind of these arrogant gentlemen at the opening of the campaign. This powerful combination long ago drove the public to resort to circulating libraries in order to mitigate the oppression of high prices. From this circumstance publishers drew the inference that this is not a book-buying nation, but one which actually prefers to wait indefinitely for the loan of such books as these libraries choose to purvey, and to do without such books as do not appear in their catalogues. On this theory, which excellently suited their sleepy traditions, the publishers with one accord ignored the immense growth of the reading public during the last sixty and especially during the last thirty years, adhering unanimously to the system of small editions at high prices. Their argument ran, that as few people buy an expensive book, therefore books must be made expensive in order that publishers may make a good profit out of a small number. From this fundamental fallacy proceed more or less directly

most of the abuses of the publishing system. The experience of the Book Club is that when books are at reasonable prices the public will buy, and that every reduction in price increases the buying public to a more than commensurate extent. This accords with general experience in business of all kinds.

There are about 55,000,000 English-speaking people under the British flag, and over 80,000,000 more under the American. A man writes a book in the language of that mighty host, not a book for the learned, or the antiquarian, or the scientific, but just an ordinary book to amuse the ordinary man for an hour or two. He takes it to a publisher, and that publisher prints 750 copies—he calls it 1000, but that is only his playful way of dealing with figures—for that vast number of the human race. Would not this be positively comic if use and wont had not dulled our sense? Then the publisher charges five or six shillings for a copy that ought to cost about sixpence, so that the man who buys it and sits down in his chair to read it pays for his hour of amusement as much as would have bought him for a longer period the pleasures of music and scenery, the services of a whole company of actors, and a brilliant dialogue by Mr. Bernard Shaw. Again is not this decidedly comic? Things are so, simply because a timid and grasping middleman, with no ideas larger than those of the ancestral back-shop, sees his way to making two hundred per cent. profit in three months upon the paltry little sum he has risked. Even in his benighted way he produces a copy for less than a shilling, and he sells it for from 3s. 4d. to 3s. 8d. The booksellers do not buy many because the millions will not buy from them, but the circulating libraries can be

depended on to take six or seven hundred copies, and if the operation is repeated often enough the middleman does extremely well, while the authors get neither money nor circulation. At one-third of the price the book would be freely bought, and could be produced for sixpence a copy. There would be a larger reward for the author, but the middleman would have to do a little work for his money, beyond writing orders to the printers and binders, which is about the extent of his services at present.

It was conclusively shown that the system of the publishers is highly detrimental to the interests of authors even when honestly worked, injuring them alike in pocket and in reputation by the severe restrictions it places upon their appeal to the public. But the temptation to work the system unfairly is apparently too strong for average virtue. It was proved by analysis of figures supplied by the publishers themselves, and of the contracts which authors are compelled to sign, that they are most unfairly used not only by struggling publishers but also by firms enjoying an established reputation. In the case of profit-sharing contracts the books are debited with costs of production in excess of what the publisher actually paid; and are further charged with advertisements, most of which go straight into the publisher's pocket, and are useless for the author's purposes; while on the other side of the account the receipts are not fully credited. If accounts are rendered, they do not represent the real state of affairs, and they are frequently refused altogether. Thus the publisher recoups himself for his outlay with a profit of fifty or even a hundred per cent. before anything is shown as profit divisible

with the author who contributed the contents of the book for nothing. The royalty system is constantly worked in such a way that the publisher is safe while the author gets nothing, and may be seriously out of pocket if he has been induced to pay half, meaning in practice the whole, of the cost of production. Mr. G. W. E. Russell tells a story in his "Seeing and Hearing" about a certain book of his with regard to which the publisher's arrangement was that the author should begin to receive royalties only after the first 5000 copies had been sold. The total number actually sold by the publisher was 5004! It sounds like a comic opera joke, but the story could be capped by other transactions that came to the knowledge of the Book Club in the course of the controversy. When the author pays for bringing out the book on the contract system he had need to be a very sharp man of business to avoid overcharges, and he commonly finds that the price put upon his book stands in the way of its sale, while the publisher ceases to push it. The author may be aware that three-fourths of the edition are lying in the publisher's warehouse, and that the Book Club could readily sell them at a reduced price. But the publisher will not consent to any reduction, and will not sell to the Book Club on any terms, although he has paid no money and taken no risks. He will rather keep the copies for a year, and then sell them as remainders at about the cost of the paper, putting the small sum they fetch into his own pocket. To admit the principle of reducing prices to meet the market would be to make a breach in the system, which the trust sternly forbids, even if an individual publisher should be willing to make the experiment.

It has been shown again that the small bookseller gets no more consideration than the author. He is a useful stalking-horse. The publishers made great play with him for a time, bidding the public weep over his impending ruin, and talking solemn cant about his importance as the distributor of their books. They know quite well that he is of no importance, and they treat him accordingly. The books are too costly for him to stock, and the publishers will not let him have them on sale or return. He gets the *minimum* discount, and his situation compels him to pay carriage on single books. He is directly competed with by booksellers in London and sometimes even by publishers. He is, in short, a highly inefficient distributor, and the publishers do nothing to improve him. There are, of course, big booksellers in London and other large towns who get the best discounts, who share the profits of the net-book imposture, and who stand in generally with the publishers. But it would be useless to go whining about their woes, because every one knows they can take good care of themselves. It is the small men whom the public are asked to compassionate as victims of the Book Club. They were ruined before the Book Club was heard of, by the refusal of the publishers to recognise the changes going on around them. In the fight for cheaper books fifty years ago some of the big booksellers—in some cases predecessors in title of firms that are in business to-day—were on the side of progress. They in fact started the fight by doing just what the Book Club does to-day, *i.e.* by asserting their right to sell at any price they found convenient the books for which they had paid the publishers their full trade charges. That is all that the Book Club claims

to-day, but the booksellers are now on the side of reaction. The reason is twofold. In the first place, they have been squared by the ingenious inventors of the net-book system. That system robs the public of the discounts which mitigate the dearness of books, but it gives the big booksellers a considerable share of the plunder. The other reason for their attitude is that they have not kept pace with the changes of the last half-century, and are naturally hostile to the Book Club because it offers facilities to the book-buying public which they have not been wise enough to provide.

Last, but not least important, what has the controversy disclosed as to the effect upon the public of the publishing system? It has been demonstrated by argument, corroborated by testimony from all ranks and conditions of men, that public interests suffer in every direction from the proceedings of the Publishers' Trust. Only the very rich, to whom nothing matters much in the way of prices, escape privation. Men of moderate incomes find their literary pleasures curtailed, and men of small means find them cut off by the unreasonable prices imposed by publishers. Those who are compelled to buy certain classes of books for professional reasons suffer cruelly from the exactions of publishers, although the authors of the books have in most cases received no reward for their labours. The millions whom we have taught to read find that the keys of knowledge do not admit them to the treasure-house, because a publisher exacts a toll that they cannot pay. The libraries to which they have recourse are themselves hampered and crippled by the exorbitant prices of books. Nothing is cheap except

the literary weeds that spring in profusion from soil upon which the publishers forbid cultivation. We prate of free trade, free food, and so on, but there is no free knowledge. The most pernicious of all taxes is recklessly levied not for the benefit of a distressed treasury, but for that of a small class wielding a monopoly to which it has no right. Intrinsically, the production of books is cheap. Paper-makers, ink-makers, printers, and binders all work under competitive conditions. They are constantly seeking to cheapen production, and they cannot earn more than average business profits. If to their charges the author were to add an equal amount for his own reward, books would still be cheap, and could easily be sold for one-third of their present prices. But a middleman steps in, and without adding a farthing to the value of the book, seizes upon the economies of its real producers, annexes the reward of its author, and demands from the public nine times the cost of production. It may be said that he does not get all this. No, he does not; but his system gets it all, and the public have to pay it all.

Looking back over the controversy, the most striking thing is the unsubstantial character of the opposition to reform. At the end of every single argument on that side we find the publisher-middleman and no one else. It is always the middleman's profits, the middleman's dignity, the middleman's power, or the middleman's whims that we find blocking the way. There is never anything else; the middleman fights exclusively for his own hand. He has pretended to be fighting for the author—a somewhat audacious pretension in view of his reputation with generations of authors—and

oddly enough it is just because he deserves that reputation so thoroughly that he has been able to control the attitude of authors so far as to lend a certain plausibility to the pretension. That pretension is, however, exploded. He has been convicted out of his own mouth, by his own admissions, and by his own published contract forms, of systematically oppressing, squeezing, tricking, and plundering the authors. He has pretended to be the protector of the booksellers; but it has been conclusively proved that he merely employs them as his tools to block the avenues of distribution against any one who does not pay toll to himself. The booksellers are bribed when they are strong and bullied when they are weak, but in one way or another they are made to subserve the interests of the publishers. It has been a little difficult even to put up a pretence of defending any public interest, and the most genuine thing among the utterances of the publishers has been their petulant accusation that the public want to get the books for nothing. "Who are the public, and what have they to do with the prices of books?"—was the angry question of a publisher at an early stage of the controversy. All attempts to establish community of interests between publishers and any other class have utterly broken down. It is *Athanasius contra mundum*—and such an Athanasius! Though he sits on the neck of every one connected with book-production, he is of no intrinsic importance. When he buys a manuscript he takes the place of the author who sells it, but in all other cases he must properly be rated simply as the author's business agent, entitled to a modest payment for knowing a little more than the author about the ways of industry. Booksellers used

to discharge his functions, and they can be discharged to-day by any master-printer. It is not reasonable to suppose that a class which can so easily be replaced can indefinitely maintain for its own exclusive benefit a system which is contrary to the interests of the entire community. It has succeeded so long partly because the necessity for cheap books and rational methods was never so urgent as it is to-day, and partly because it has never before come into direct collision with an organisation able to throw the full blaze of publicity upon all its practices. These practices do not show well under the search-light, nor can they ever again be withdrawn into the favouring shadow.

As already intimated, there is no need for publishers as a separate class. Any one can publish a book, any author can publish his own, supposing him to be able to grasp a few not very difficult business details. There is certainly practical convenience in having central places where a variety of books may be obtained at once, but publishers meet that practical want very imperfectly. This is shown by the fact that another special class has grown up to meet it—the class of wholesale book-agents. A man in the country may want a dozen volumes brought out by as many different publishers. He goes to the book-agent who deals in the books of all the publishers, and offers a much more efficient central supply than any of them. Hence the publishers are already superseded in their chief practical functions as book-dealers or book-brokers. Their strength lies in something which is outside of publishing, and which a man who brings out his own book does not encounter until the publishing is accomplished. He then discovers that distribution is the real difficulty.

The publishers control the distributors, who ignore books not published by them, so that the author-publisher cannot get his books shown or sold. But if this is the strength of the publishers it is also their weakness, for no position can be regarded as really strong when its key is not in the hands of its defenders. The alliance with the holders of the key may be very close at the moment, but it is liable to be broken down. The interests of publishers and booksellers are not identical, nor is the alliance wholly unforced. It is already weakened by the heavy loss of prestige which the publishers have suffered; and other forces are at work which operate in the same direction. Nor is the distributing system itself in a strong position. Taken as a whole it is an inefficient system, and inefficiency means weakness. In the country at large it is negligible, since it is no more than an agency for transmission of orders which can be as effectively conveyed to the nearest big town by postcards. In the large towns booksellers are subject to influences that slowly modify their attitude, while competition is or will now become keen enough to ensure the appearance of breaches in walls which booksellers have only a secondary interest in defending,

Inefficient distribution by booksellers has already led in the United States to a very remarkable displacement of business. At least sixty per cent. of the retail trade in books has passed out of the hands of booksellers into those of other retail traders who have shops open for general business, and find no difficulty in adding books to their list of articles. The same thing is already going on here, and may be expected to proceed at an accelerating rate. Booksellers indeed have set

the example by encroaching upon the provinces of various other retailers, and they cannot complain when the tables are turned. It will be impossible for publishers permanently to maintain a distinction between men who call themselves booksellers but sell stationery, fancy goods, or perfumery, and men who call themselves storekeepers or drapers, but sell books. The retail book-trade must pass into the hands of efficient salesmen, no matter whether they begin or end with books. Through this wider competition will come the emancipation of the retail book-trade from the bondage in which it is now held by the publishers. They may coerce booksellers pure and simple, but they cannot coerce men who sell books as part of a general business. Those—and they are an increasing number—who bring out books at reasonable prices, must look for their reward to a large circulation, and cannot afford to fetter the retailers with antiquated restrictions. The successful sellers of books will have to be reckoned with by publishers who try to adhere to the old methods. These business-like distributors cannot be hindered from selling any book that the public want, though the author may have brought it out himself without any eminent publisher's name upon the title-page. Thus the book-selling bulwark erected by the publishers against the author on the one hand and the public on the other is already being undermined. There is another distributing agency, the *rôle* of which must be considerable, though it is not perhaps easy to define at the moment. Public libraries are already numerous and are certain to increase in number and importance. They must be considered as a whole, because they are all supported out of the rates. They are just as much a public invest-

ment as the elementary schools, and in the aggregate they constitute a buyer upon the largest scale. They are entitled to, and they must enjoy, the advantages that belong to wholesale buying. Publishers will be ill-advised if they persist in the attempt to hold the ratepayers to ransom. The part of wisdom is to regard the public libraries as large consumers and to treat them accordingly. In the circumstances just mentioned the pretence of conserving the interests of booksellers will be treated with very scanty respect. As for the interests of publishers, they are in no danger except from the obstinacy of publishers themselves. Reasonable prices and a free market mean an indefinite increase in the volume of business. The Book Club bought 2000 copies of Mr. Shaw's new book, and sold the greater part of them within a month, yet Mr. Shaw reports no falling-off in the sales he expected in other quarters. That points to the path of success alike for authors and for publishers. Booksellers neither refuse to sell nor fail to sell when an author insists upon supplying his book to the Book Club.

IV

THE RESULTS

To the casual observer the results of the campaign may not appear very definite. Real life frequently falls short of dramatic requirements. Nothing has happened of the nature of a cataclysm, nor is it likely that anything of that kind will be witnessed. Neither army has eaten up the other, and both may seem to the non-military spectator to occupy practically the same ground as before. A good deal has happened nevertheless. No body of men—not even a trust—can undergo the scathing exposure that the publishers have suffered without feeling the consequences. Their schemes have been baffled, their prestige has been destroyed in the eyes alike of the authors and the public, their lofty pretensions have been made ridiculous, the squalid little tricks of their practice have been exposed, and the bad faith of their tactics has been laid bare. They have to pay for these things, but the total bill is not presented on the first Saturday night. They will not know the measure of the full harvest until long after seed-time has passed.

The impatient may however discover some immediate practical results even now if they take the trouble to go ever so little beneath the surface. It has to be remembered in the first place that the publishers buckled on their armour and went forth to conquer.

They were full of confidence and made no secret of their belief that they were going to bring the Book Club to its knees. One publisher said: "*The Times* has got to give up shortly—see what they lose by our not advertising." In other words, see how coolly we are using the money of the authors to do that which our practice of forty years asserts to be contrary to their interests. Another publisher said: "They cannot hold out long because they *must* have our books and they cannot get them." Accustomed as the publishers were to dominate authors on one hand and distributors on the other by the use of the boycott in one form or another, it seemed to them that there could be no doubt of the efficacy of that weapon for the subjugation of a "solitary upstart." They were a little astonished that the mere disclosure of their intended measures did not produce the desired effect at once, but their soothsayers told them to go up and conquer, and like their Israelitish prototype they went up but did not conquer. There is reason to believe that some of their wiser counsellors advised them to stay at home, and pointed out that when stripped of rhetorical exaggeration the matter they complained about was not of such importance as to justify an expedition the fate of which could not be predicted with absolute certainty. The wisdom of that advice is vindicated by the fact that the sales of second-hand copies within the period of six months from publication are only 17 per cent. of the total sales of the Book Club. What percentage that is of the total book-trade the publishers can perhaps calculate for themselves. Prudence, however, was overborne by pique and cupidity. It was conceived that the Book Club, if not destroyed, could

be made to pay a heavy annual tribute, by being compelled to buy thousands of pounds' worth of books and to keep them useless in its store-rooms until its own exertions had caused people to buy all the copies they wanted from the Trust. Now the success of the Trust must be judged first of all by the fate of this gratuitously undertaken enterprise, and its failure is the first item to be placed to the debit of the publishers in summing up the results of the war up to date. For that it has egregiously miscarried everybody is now aware. The Book Club has not been destroyed, nor has it been made to pay tribute. On the contrary it has flourished and has made the publishers pay. It has enormously increased its sales, while at the same time it has reduced its purchases from the Trust. The publishers would not let it have their books to sell, so it bought and sold large quantities of books from other sources. These books were less costly than the books of British publishers. Foreign publishers were glad to quote exceptionally easy terms in order to be introduced to the members of the Book Club; and many French and American authors have profited greatly. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the books thus sold took the place of books which the publishers did not sell. While a man is entertaining or instructing himself with a book from France or America he is not looking for a Trust book. He is even apt next time he wants a book to make use of his discovery that he may find things fresher and more piquant than the costly and rather stereotyped productions of the British publishers. Of course the process here indicated is not good for the British author. But what can the Book Club do? Being forbidden to buy his books it

cannot sell them: but that is no reason why it should not sell what it can buy. It does not affect to be superior to the law of self-preservation, and no one can say that it has not done everything in its power to urge authors to consult their own interests.

This brings us to another result of the campaign—that authors are actually learning to fight their own battle by insisting that their books shall be supplied to the Book Club. It was difficult to get them to believe that they could do anything. Most of them were content to bewail their hard lot, and to regard it as unchangeable. But it takes more than wailing to touch the stony heart of a publisher. People who say that nothing can be done never do anything, while people who try what can be done often do what is apparently impossible. The Book Club has made things far easier for authors by showing how little there is behind the imposing façade of the Trust, and how little but pasteboard and paint is the façade itself. Mr. Bernard Shaw has shown them how to go to work. He has brought out an edition of his new book the title-page of which sets forth that “This Edition is issued by the Author for *The Times* Book Club.” There is no other publisher’s name. Other authors can do the same thing. The beauty of Mr. Shaw’s method is that it does not compromise the publisher by forcing him to depart openly from his agreement with the Trust. He yields to *force majeure*. One service rendered to authors by the Book Club is that it has knocked down publishers’ profits so far that some of them would not be sorry to be placed under the same compulsion. It is a pleasing game to fight the Book Club with authors’ profits, but it is another

matter when the profits of the publishers themselves are involved. Authors are therefore now placed in a favourable position for insisting upon their equitable if not their legal right to forbid the injuring of their interests to subserve the private ends of publishers. They are learning to insist, and every one who does so makes things easier for the rest.

The next result of the campaign that claims attention is a movement in favour of publishing books at reasonable prices. High prices and restricted circulation form the central citadel of the publishers' position. To bring out a book at 36s. net which costs 3s. or 4s. to produce and which no man of sense would dream of buying at the price, to trust to the compulsory but strictly limited purchases of the circulating libraries for repayment of the publisher's outlay with a high percentage of profit, and to let the author's interests take care of themselves—that is the publisher's notion of dignity and rational business, and enlightened patronage of literature. Authors are beginning to demand the production of their books at prices more closely related to their cost, more likely to make a large public acquainted with their work, and better calculated to replenish their purses. A good many books have already been the subjects of sharp controversy between author and publisher, in which the publisher has not always had the best of it. Books have lately issued from very stiff-necked quarters at one-third of the prices invariably put upon exactly comparable volumes before the book war began. That movement, like the revolt against the boycott, is bound to grow. Both are yet in their infancy, but that both are fairly started within a few months of the opening of the

campaign, and in spite of the great mass of prejudice and inertia that had to be overcome, shows that publishers are yet a long way from seeing the last consequences of their ill-judged actions.

Not the least significant result of the contest is that the leaven of reform is working inside the publishing body itself. Numerous cheap reprints of standard books no longer copyright are supplying to people of small means the reading which publishers have denied them. But they are doing more. They are bought also by persons better provided with money, and to that extent undoubtedly displace high-priced modern books. Nor does the matter stop there. Several publishers are now turning out copyright novels at half-a-crown, sometimes net and sometimes subject to discount, which are just as well got up, and while away a leisure hour just as agreeably as the six-shilling novels they will eventually supersede. These publishers are not the gentlemen hitherto censured as "eminent" or as "enjoying a world-wide reputation," but they are none the worse for that. They belong to the new time and they will grow. Indeed one or two shy approaches to their prices and methods are already to be noted on the part of the more superb specimens of the publishing trade. It is only fiction that is so treated at present, on a considerable scale, but it will presently occur to somebody that there is an equally good field for similar treatment of serious books in a systematic manner. Possibly we may not have long to wait for scientific treatises and hand-books at prices more suited to the millions of potential buyers than those demanded by Macmillans, but no whit less profitable to the authors. There is one other interesting development which

claims a word of notice. It is the reprinting of copyright novels which have seen their palmy days, at the extraordinarily low price of sevenpence. That the authors are content with a royalty of one penny would hardly call for remark were it not that some of them were not long ago the impassioned advocates of that theory which indissolubly connects the dignity of literature with high prices. It is more important to note that they tacitly recognise by their action the existence of a public worth catering for at prices lower than the Book Club has ever ventured to advocate.

In these cheap reprints of novels still copyright may be descried the germ of another desirable reform so consonant with reason that it will certainly be accomplished. The authors of the novels thus reprinted are differentiating books according to their presumable attractiveness. They do not expect the public to be so keen about a book published ten years ago as about another from the same pen recently issued, so they bring out the old one at a very low price. Uniformity of price for all books of a given class is one of the many absurdities of the present system. An absolutely unknown novelist of average ability is handicapped by being compelled to publish his novel at the same price as that of the most popular writer of the time. He gets no fair chance. Prices being equal, buyers naturally prefer a book bearing a name that they know. If the new author were wise he would insist upon publication at a price which would to some extent counterbalance the superior attractiveness of a familiar name, and would tempt the large public to whom two or three shillings on a book is of importance, to buy his book and perhaps become his admirers. A few months ago Mr. John

Murray explained to the public in a magazine what skill and sagacity a publisher requires to decide how many copies of a book he shall print at a stereotyped and excessive price. That is because he looks for his profit to a small circulation at a high price, disregarding the author who first of all requires a large circulation at almost any price, and can afterwards raise his price in proportion to the public he has interested. The publisher of the future will have to display skill and sagacity in answering the question—How low must I make the price of this book in order to command a considerable sale? A dull mechanic uniformity of price holds sway in respect of serious books just as much as in respect of novels, though it is a little less obvious to a casual observer. A book of certain dimensions is marked at a certain price, irrespective of its value or of its attractiveness, and the author is deprived of the power to appeal to the public on his merits. He has to appeal in the form that perhaps suits the most eminent author of the day who writes a book upon the same number of square feet of paper. Variety of price corresponding to variety of intellectual appeal is needed both by authors and by the public, and the first dim tentative recognition of the fact is now before the world.

As for the results to the Book Club itself they are not by any means what the publishers expected. If they took the authors' advertisements from *The Times* they presented the Book Club with a splendid advertisement. The sales doubled within one month and trebled within two months of the proclamation of the boycott. They would have grown in any case, but they would not have run up with that startling rapidity

had things followed their normal course. Every visitor to the Book Club is struck by the prevailing activity, yet he carries away a necessarily inadequate impression of the vast amount of business transacted. Between circulation and sales, some ten thousand books are handled every day. In spite of the boycott the sales of second-hand books have increased enormously, but the increase in the sale of new books has been immensely greater. Though the Book Club has not been allowed in the case of many living authors to push their interests as it would have been glad to do, it has procured for many others a circulation they could not otherwise obtain. It is entirely the fault of their publishers that the Book Club has not been able to procure for them profit as well. It has sold by hundreds, and in many cases to the extent of well over a thousand, copies of books which in the hands of the publishers were dead, and useless to the author from every point of view. They were good books, they were books which the public wanted to read and to buy, but their published prices were such that the average buyer looked at them as he might look at a five-hundred-guinea breast-pin. At reasonable prices they sold freely, and that, too, long after reviewers had ceased to notice them, or the diner-out to ask his neighbour whether he had seen them. The Book Club could have sold all these books at least as freely when they first came out, at prices remunerative to the author, had they been published and priced on a reasonable system. They no doubt paid the middleman very well upon a ridiculously small sale, while the author got neither reward nor circulation. The Book Club gives him what may almost be called a post-

humous circulation, and the profit which ought to have been his is divided between the Book Club and the public—the two parties against whom the boycott is directed.

Such are the results of the campaign initiated by the Publishers' Trust. They are far from unimportant in themselves, and they must be regarded as highly significant in view of the shortness of the time that has elapsed since the reforms suggested by the Book Club were met with a storm of invective. But their chief importance lies in the fact that they represent the initial stages of great and fundamental changes the full development of which alone can give the true measure of what has been accomplished by the Book War.