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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

MEN, of the author's generation, who served in the war of 1914-18 will remember how, when they were in training, they used to practise 'passing messages'. It was a pleasant and amusing change from more strenuous drill. They would spread out a few feet apart, so as not to overhear one another, and then the instructor, speaking quietly, gave the nearest man a 'message' – a short and simple sentence. The first man told the second, the second the third, and so on to the end.

The last man *should* have received exactly the same message as the first, but, as often as not, he didn't. It was surprising how the original sentence would get distorted, even though it passed through but a dozen mouths and ears. Words would be missed out. Words would be added. Words would have changed their meaning, sound and significance, be altered, even reversed.

Although these recruits were trying to keep the message intact and accurate they often failed. How if they had been excited or unheeding? What would the percentage of error have been then? Try it, as a parlour game, and see.

There is the well-known instance – obviously untrue, yet illustrating the point – of the officer who was about to attack. He 'passed' a message asking the captain of the neighbouring company for assistance. None came, and he wondered why, until he learned later that the captain had received no message at all that morning excepting this, which he took for a joke – 'I am going to a dance. Can you lend me three and fourpence?' It is easy to guess the original message. 'I am going to advance. Can you send me reinforcements?'

If that might happen with a few men in a few minutes,

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ask yourself how accurate, how complete, your knowledge of things in general would be if all the information you had on every matter, beyond the few things you could see for yourself, had had to come to you by word of mouth, from hundreds of mouths, uttering strange languages, perhaps speaking down the centuries, across the world. And it would be tainted and transformed, not only because it had not been 'heard' properly, but also because every man who carried it a step nearer to you would receive it and send it forth again according to his own knowledge and personality. In such circumstances you would not, if you had any alternative, rely overmuch on its accuracy.

Neither would your information be complete.

Think how much you forget, even though you want to remember it. If a thing is at all important you have to *make a note of it*.

Consider our knowledge of past times – of, say, the Middle Ages. Students may, by a process of conjecture, comparison, and piecing together, be able to reconstruct the life of the times and give us, in general terms, a fair idea of conditions. But what actual *facts* have come down to us – facts which are unassailable and definite? The names and ordinances of kings and chiefs, the decrees of popes and priests, the decisions of courts of law – those matters, in brief, which have been put down in black and white. Practically everything else has been forgotten. Thousands of years of human history have had to be written round a few notes jotted down by the way. Of the personal history of some of our greatest men – for example, Shakespeare – we know little but what has been dug up from legal documents relating to leases, sales of property, disputes, and the like, from registers, and from the odd occasions when friends and contemporaries mentioned them in their letters and writings.

By *writing* alone can we transmit information from one generation to another, unless the actual things that people make – buildings, coins, statues, tools – themselves survive,

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and even then we don't always know what they are unless there is some written explanation.

Even that is not all.

If you were engaged on scientific research and you had to begin right at the beginning, finding out everything for yourself, ignorant of what previous scientists had learned, unable to compare notes with other workers in different parts of the world, how far would you get in a lifetime?

One could ask many similar questions. We have only to give the matter a few moments' consideration to realize that, after the discovery of how to make fire and after the gradual development of speech by which men might exchange their thoughts and ideas, the most important factor in human history was the invention and perfection of means by which speech might be recorded – writing and, later, printing.

It meant that, for the first time, it was possible, in a world of change and confusion, to pick out a fact and 'nail it down' for all time, unchanging, unambiguous – to say: 'This is' or 'This was', so that all might know.

It meant that a man could communicate with those with whom he could not speak – either because they were far away or because they were not yet born.

It meant that each generation could hand on something of what it had learned; that each generation started a little further ahead; that gradually we *accumulated* knowledge and power.

It meant – a point of no less importance – that a man did not need to rely only on what he knew himself. There is a limit, which is very soon reached, to what anyone can remember and understand. Before writing came no one *could* know more than he himself and his neighbours were able to learn and remember. It could only be a very small part of the sum total of knowledge. Once writing was invented, however, once manuscripts and books were accessible, it became possible to *find out*.

So we may assert that our present-day civilization owes

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its existence to the written word, the printed page. If tomorrow we all forgot how to read, in a very few years we should have reverted to the conditions of the Dark Ages – if, indeed, we survived the chaos that would ensue.

Books form only a small part of the total output of printed matter. Millions of different items, all designed to convey or record information, are circulated every year – handbills, price-lists, catalogues, programmes, and the like, the reports and minutes of thousands of institutions and organizations, newspapers, periodicals, maps, plans, time-tables, prospectuses, calendars, leaflets, and pamphlets of every description.

Here, however, we are concerned only with books – the most substantial, the most permanent and in some ways the most important of printed publications.

How many books are there in the world? It is impossible to say, but the following figures will give some slight indication:

Since the invention of printing many million different books have been published. Of some of them hundreds of different editions have been issued and millions of copies sold. Think of the enormous circulations of such books as the Bible, Shakespeare's or Molière's works, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and many others, often much less famous.

Before the war 17,000 *different* new books and new editions were published in one year in Great Britain alone, a similar number in Japan, nearly twice as many in pre-Nazi Germany, 7,000 in the United States – and other countries more or less in proportion. The number fell considerably during the war; the total for Great Britain in 1944 was only 6781. Once conditions become normal again, however, we are likely to exceed the pre-war output because there is a considerable accumulation of interesting and important books the publication of which waits only until more labour and material are available.

How many copies of each book are sold we do not know, but remember that practically every copy is read by several people. If it is sold to a circulating library it might be read

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by a hundred or two before it is finally discarded. Moreover, books are kept – some for only a short while, as their interest is passing, but others for tens and even hundreds of years. In other words, this stupendous output of books becomes an accumulation, an ever-increasing asset.

Consequently, since all sorts and conditions of men are reading, and reading about the things which interest and help them most, we find that the world of books covers an immense field – one almost as extensive as life itself. There are few trades, shades of political opinion, religious beliefs, hobbies, nationalities, which are not represented even in the list of periodicals published regularly, and when we turn to books we should all find it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to name any subject about which a book has not been written at some time or other.

If you were to study the contents of a large general library you would find an entire world in little. There would be books recording everything at all significant, important, interesting, usual or unusual, that men had ever seen, done, experienced, thought, or imagined.

As a rule libraries are ‘classified’ – arranged so that all books on the same or similar subjects are brought together. This arrangement is necessary for many reasons but, by bringing ‘order’ into what would otherwise be chaos, it makes it less easy to grasp at once the enormous *variety* of the material. This factor would be more apparent if we went into a library that was *not* classified, for there we should find a strange assortment of books – serious and trivial, accurate and utterly unreliable, attractive and dull, ahead of public opinion and completely out of date. Books in which great men seek to help their fellows to attain happiness, books on how to manufacture poison-gas, lives of kings and treatises on bee-keeping, sermons and Acts of Parliament, books about geography, geology, music, psychology and similar familiar themes, and books about vector analysis, curvilinear motion, geraniaceæ, anticlisis, and thousands of other such subjects, the very titles of which would mean

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nothing to most of us, would jostle one another on the shelves.

Yet, innumerable though the themes themselves might be, there is still another factor which increases the multiplicity and variety of books – the reader and his special needs. He may know nothing about a particular subject or he may know nearly everything; he may be studying it in order to pass an examination; he may be interested only in a general way in its most interesting features; he may be of exceptional intelligence, or he may be barely able to read at all. He may, in fact, approach it in any of a hundred ways. And the book written for one would be useless to another, although the ‘subject’ is the same. So the book world must cater for all these needs.

Consequently, if you want to get some idea of the extent of literature you should think, first, of all the conceivable subjects you can remember, and then imagine books written so as to please everyone who might have any need to read about them. Add a few million for stories, poems, plays and other ‘imaginative’ books . . . and does anyone now dare to say that there aren’t *some* books that he himself ought to read?

Unfortunately, only those whose lives are spent with books – librarians, booksellers, research-workers and the like – have any conception of their amazing range and variety. The average man only knows a few types – shall we say, perhaps the detective story, the time-table and the Bible, or the school text, the practical handbook and poetry. Most of us live in a world full of useful, interesting books, but we do not realize it. We have a few friends when we might have many; only one or two literary assistants when we might call upon an army of helpers.

The objects of this little book therefore are to indicate something of the scope and variety of books, to show how, whatever your interests and circumstances may be, they can be of some use to you, and, which is equally important, to help you to discover and obtain those you require.

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## INTRODUCTION

So long as a man has access to books there are very few matters about which he cannot learn something. Reading alone does not suffice. Knowledge and information only become of any value when they are applied to some human end, when they lead to better accomplishment or keener understanding. Yet – in spite of what militant ‘men of action’ might preach – the great needs of the present generation (as of all past generations too) are on the one hand more, and more accurate, facts regarding all phases of activity, and, on the other, a brighter vision, a keener imagination. Both of these needs may, to a large extent, be supplied by reading.

To bring this still nearer home – it may safely be asserted that whoever the reader may be, whatever his occupation, whatever his circumstances, if, by means of books, he keeps himself in touch with all that is most significant in life and fully informed on all matters concerning his own personal activities, he will surely be much more successful than others with similar ability and good fortune who *neglect* books. And if the reader should have ‘bad fortune’, he will probably learn, from those same books, that ‘success’ is not everything, and that the worst of ill-luck has its compensations.

The use of books has increased greatly during and since the war. New books have been in such demand that many have been unobtainable a few days after publication – a condition arising partly from the limitation of supplies but also from increased desire to read and ability to buy. For example, shortly before the end of hostilities the first edition of a book by an eminent historian, on a theme of wide appeal, was exhausted before publication; the edition was not, however, a small one – in fact it was much larger than any first printing of any of that author’s books in pre-war days. To continue – the prices of second-hand books have soared. The work of public libraries throughout has been from twenty to fifty per cent greater than in 1939.

For this war-time renaissance in reading there are many reasons. On the one hand, people had fewer opportunities

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for other recreations, more cause to stay at home, new opportunities for reading – as, for example, when ‘standing-by’ for civil defence duties, a greater need for relaxation and ‘escape’. On the other hand, people had new things to do and new problems to solve, about all of which they needed information and guidance. Above all people were intensely eager to know more and to think more wisely about the world in which they lived, about the forces that had brought civilization so near to disaster and about the ways in which the future could be made more secure and fruitful.

With the return of peace some of the purely war-time factors, such as ‘black-out’ and ‘stand-by’, have ceased to operate but the main influences continue. Men and women who have once acquired the habit of reading and thus come to appreciate its value, seldom cease to read. The new readers were not all civilians, either. Tens of thousands in the Navy, Army and Air Force have started to read – so much so, indeed, that the many millions of books distributed by the Services Central Book Depot, the Services’ education departments and other large scale agencies proved quite insufficient to satisfy the demand.

In brief, the number of readers in the post-war world will be many more than ever before. And the moral is obvious: in a book-using civilization the man who does not use them places himself at a grave disadvantage compared with his fellows.



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## CHAPTER TWO

## THE BOOKS YOU WANT

NOWHERE in this book is it suggested that you should *ever* read unless you gain *some* benefit – recreational or informative – from reading – or if you would be better occupied doing anything else.

This might sound very lukewarm recommendation of books; but it isn't. If you utilize *all* your opportunities for *useful* reading you will be well occupied.

Book use might be divided into three types: Firstly, *purposive use*, when you read or consult or study books with some definite object in mind, such as gathering information for a debate or learning how to do something which you propose to undertake, and so on – book use which is directly associated with your various other activities. Secondly, there is *reading for interest* and stimulation – when you read books because they are about things which interest you; because they add to your general store of knowledge and understanding, widen your range of appreciation, and generally broaden your outlook and help to 'educate' you. Thirdly, there is the mere pastime of reading – in which we are all more or less guilty of indulging – when we read, not because, when we have finished, we shall be any wiser or better, but simply because we want mental relaxation, because we are tired or, more likely, just lazy. There is nothing 'wrong' about such reading; but with a wider knowledge of books we can often select reading which belongs to the second category – which interests and stimulates – while still serving as excellent recreation.

Now ask yourself the question: 'What use can books be to *me*?'

With the first class of book use, the answer is: 'Whenever you have occasion to know anything you don't know, what-

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ever the reason, whatever kind of information it might be.' There is some information you cannot find in books; for example, it might concern events of too recent occurrence; it might be of too limited appeal; it might be 'private' (such as a secret trade process); but it is surprising how much you *can* find. Of course, you need to know something about books and how to handle them before they are of the fullest use; to discover the answers to *some* questions you have to be a specialist in research work with a very wide knowledge of the literature of your subject. You will soon, however, acquire facility with practice, and generally you will have little difficulty in satisfying *most* of your needs. Moreover, at your libraries (and your bookshops in certain cases) you will find qualified people always willing to help you – of which more later.

Keep this in mind, then. If you want to know anything, try books first.

Examples are probably unnecessary, but the following instances will serve to remind some readers of possible uses for books:

At work – to keep in touch with the best and newest methods; to remedy defects and improve conditions; to find solutions for problems of organization and administration; to discover new markets and their special requirements; to settle legal questions; to understand better the processes of manufacture, the qualities and defects of raw materials; to organize publicity campaigns; to understand financial matters, banks and how to use them; to help fill up income tax returns; arrange shop windows; learn book-keeping, shorthand, filing methods, and so on. There are hundreds of books on all these matters.

At home – to make or mend anything; to use your garden to the best advantage, discovering what to plant and how to look after it; to decorate, furnish, cope with minor ailments, choose schools and careers for your children; arrange your private affairs; care for dogs and keep pets; cook, manage the household, entertain; to enjoy your hobby and pursue