



BOSTON AS A SHOPPING CITY

By HELOISE E. HERSET

Civilized woman shops as naturally as she breathes. The Indian squaw grasps without discrimination whatever she can get, and delights in beads or blankets, hats or shoes with a complete disregard of the adaptability of each to her need. The first symptom of advance in the scale of living may be seen when she begins to choose and select, —to weigh advantage against price, to compare color and fabric, and to match both to her complexion and figure. The clerk on one side of the counter and the customer on the other write the history of society in the nations, whether the sale takes place in an Eastern bazaar with its dark-skinned merchant, its heavy perfumes, its long-drawn-out bargaining, and its final transfer of rich silk or precious stone, or whether it is made in the well-ordered, brilliantly lighted, highly organized American store, with its army of clerks trained to forestall the customer's desire, its mechanical devices to save the customer's time and strength, and its beguiling display to develop and to tempt the customer's taste.

The truth is that shopping is the vast barometer of social evolution. How far has the community climbed on the mountain path of progress ? How many stages since barbarism was left behind?



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How long before the nation shall instinctively choose the best,—sunshine and oxygen as against gloom and bad air,—durable and tasteful fabrics as against showy, shoddy ones? The market and the shop have the answers to these questions.

The methods of shopping mark the passage of the years in the history of a town as sharply as the rings on an oak tree mark its age. Each community develops its peculiar type of buying and selling for the needs of the individual and the family. In Constantinople the merchant carries his silks and velvets to the private apartments of his rich customer. In Paris, every lure to eye and touch is brought to bear to induce the customer to cross the threshold of the fascinating shop. One may travel over the face of the earth and observe in close detail the methods by which the seller of various cities makes traffic with the buyer, and works out the genius of his town and his time in his business and to his profit. If the shopman is a true Bostonian, for example, nine chances out of ten he knows his Robert Browning, or at least his wife is a member of the Browning Society; so quoting to himself Browning's immortal line, "Life's business being just the terrible choice," he sets about making that choice easy rather than difficult,—happy rather than tiresome. Boston will do it in its own way,—as different from the ways of other cities as her winding streets and her innocent Frog Pond are different from Philadelphia's prim parallels or London's tragic Serpentine.



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From the point of view of the woman who buys, modern cities are divided into two great classes. Paris and New York are types of one class; London and Vienna and Moscow and Boston are types of the other. The Paris shop is made like the spider's web,—to catch the unwary fly of any race or color or plumpness. The window in the Rue de la Paix is dressed to attract the American or English woman, or the Parisian or Russian; and the trim demoiselle who serves the customer has an impersonal mastery of her business which impresses all alike, even if it is a bit chilling in its perfection. Not even your inability to speak her language melts her heart. She can sell you gloves and necklaces,—veritable imitation you may be sure, with a fine detachment, whether you are from Kansas or from Devonshire or from "the Provinces." So in New York—the Fifth Avenue clerk or the Seventh Avenue clerk is sublimely indifferent to your local habitation and your name. You may go to a famous confectioner ten times a year for five and twenty years, and the slender, black-robed woman who fills your modest order will write your address without a glimmer of a hint that she has ever heard it before. Whatever you are to her, you are not Yourself! Perhaps she condescends to recognize the Choicest of Her Choice,—but you need not aspire to join that charmed circle.

So much for New York and Paris. Boston and London are otherwise. The shopper in those cities expects and finds a personal recognition and



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a friendly interest which would wander about in Paris like a cat in a strange garret. The advantages of a huge, impersonal city are many; but the wise woman will not despise the delights of a small community,—half village, half city,—where name and taste and purse of everybody are known to everybody else. In fact, when these more intimate relations are once established and enjoyed, they are prized as one prizes the conveniences of home. It would be easy to enumerate a score of these personal satisfactions which come pleasantly to the surface of Boston shopping. For example, it is said that a certain man in a certain Boston shop knows the size of stocking worn by twice four hundred Boston women, any one of whom would feel it a definite personal slight for him to ask her the number of her hose or her address. A certain Boston florist hurries home from a short vacation on hearing of the death of a prominent man, "because it would be more trying for the family to order from a clerk the flowers for the funeral!" Not a woman experienced in Boston shopping but remembers with admiration the famous "Amanda,"—whose strong face and gaunt figure were "features" of the store of R. H. Stearns for a generation. She knew the pattern of gingham and muslins that had graced the South Shore and the North Shore for forty years. Her memory of marriages and intermarriages and cousinships and even of family disagreements made her a perfect "Social Register" for the newcomer to Boston's inner circle.

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One might easily make a collection of illustrations of the way in which customer and clerk in Boston take the personal relation as a matter of course, as much to be counted on as a business guaranty of goods or a prompt payment of bills. A customer at the small wares counter at one of the large stores heard one morning as she was selecting her needles and pins a queer noise beneath the counter. "What is that?" she asked; "it sounds like a small and lonesome kitten!" "It is a kitten," replied the clerk; "Miss Johnson brought it in an hour ago and asked me to take care of it for her until afternoon. It cries unless I hold it all the time!" So she nestled the tiny cat up to her neck, as if the care of it was a perfectly natural and agreeable part of the day's work!

This personal relation between buyer and seller is the very climax of the art of shopping as practiced by the dealers of London. Huge as is the business of the city, the old firms have never outgrown their early habit of regarding a patron as a valuable, personal asset. A stray American in the bookstore of Bernard Quaritch,—famous among the booksellers of the world,—was amused and amazed to hear an English customer suggest that the clerk should put a corner of Cheshire cheese into the budget of books which were to go to the "shooting box" in Scotland. The clerk seemed to regard the Cheshire cheese with the same friendly attention which he bestowed on the mixture of new novels and constitutional law which his customer ordered.



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Emphasis on the personal relation between buyer and seller is nowhere more noticeable than in Boston, and nowhere in Boston more recognized by everybody concerned than at the sixty-seven-year-old establishment of R. H. Stearns and Company. At the close of the Christmas holidays of 1911 the firm issued a letter of cordial thanks to its employees for their hearty cooperation in the effort to make the best holiday business of their history. The phrases of the letter were full of real feeling, and one saw that customers and employees and partners were alike included in the general glow of satisfaction.

Next door to Stearns' famous corner stands old St. Paul's Church. It is in keeping with the traditions of the parish and its long career of helpfulness, and equally in keeping with the tradition of the firm for good neighborliness, that the church should recently have sent a letter to every person employed by its neighbor offering its help to each and every one of them in any way in which a church can serve. Intellectual and spiritual needs are recognized by both great institutions as being as imperative as the needs of the body. Church and store may work together. The doctor and the trained nurse make their rounds of the busy aisles of the shop, and priest and organist and choir boy and sexton give the welcome of religion to the worker who has also the claim of the Christian neighbor. By such means do gracious human activities grow and spread.

From one point of view modern life appears like a vast machine, the wheels of which are made



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of helpless human beings. Competition, the division of labor, the complete separation of the product from the person who produces it,—all these great economic facts which have come to pass since our grandmothers shopped seem to have conspired to take out of buying and selling all recognition of the person of buyer and seller and maker. But in the shop and in society there is working slowly and steadily another force, counteracting the tendency to make men and women into machines, and divorce their work from their welfare. This force goes by many names. One day it is called Socialism, another day it is called Human Brotherhood, another day it is called fantastically an "Uplift Movement." The names are only masquerades to conceal a shy reluctance on the part of men and women to speak the old-fashioned phrase of Christian Love. There are many evils in modern business life, and in modern society as related to business. But there is also a growing passion in the hearts of good folk to ameliorate those evils. There must be great factories where the workers are numbered by hundreds and are classed as "hands." But there are also employers to whom every pair of hands represents a living, toiling, hoping person. There are huge shops where the long procession of employees and customers moves through the aisles with no more personal recognition than as if they were so many mechanical toys; whole cities where the struggle for the newest kind of freedom has scarcely begun. In



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other cities it is well advanced,—the freedom of the community where modern civilization joins hands with brotherly love, and makes life worth living for all sorts and conditions of men.

Boston has never been so greedy of gain as some cities. She has never been so much in a hurry as others. Her shops have grown large and tempting, but they have never lost the air of those days when everybody in the town knew everybody else, and they all met at one or another of the historic "corners" in a sort of natural friendliness. Clerks and customers and owners and errand boys knew each other's names, and respected each other's work, and regarded each other's needs. Today the wisest of the merchants of Boston are taking that old friendliness and cherishing and invigorating it as a substantial part of their business. Recognition on both sides of the counter is counted as an asset by the firm and a privilege by the customer. In fact, it gives to Boston its distinctive character as a shopping city. "Do you know the name of every clerk in this store?" asked a New York woman of her Boston hostess in the midst of a morning of shopping. "No," was the reply; "but I wish I did, for most of them know my name and moreover they know what I like!" Perhaps this personal touch makes the stranger within our gates a little more strange than she likes to be, but to the Native Born it makes Boston the pleasantest shopping city in the world.