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Nothing Personal

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In the near future somewhat more than 2,000,000 of the 6,000,000 subscribers to the Saturday Evening Post (no relative of this newspaper) will be informed that the magazine is unilaterally terminating its connection with them. The disclosure that they have been banished from the circulation lists will, of course, be accompanied by reimbursement for the unexpired term of their subscriptions.

This reversal in the traditional relationship between publication and customer can only be described as revolutionary. The phrase—"I don't want to see that damn thing in my home again"—is an ancient American battle-cry, applied to magazines and newspapers alike by irate heads of families on many occasions. But never in anyone's memory have the owners of an existing journal engaged in a mass execution of readers whose subscriptions were unexpired.

There is apparently no mystery of motivation behind this remarkable act of exclusion. In a desperate effort to achieve financial stability, the SEP's latest "new team" has decided that it must seek "quality" rather than quantity on its subscription roster. With rising costs of production, the objective is to eliminate readers who cannot reasonably be described as "affluent" and acquire an audience whose income levels will impress prospective advertisers.

Computers are available to identify the residents of the lower brackets who are to be stricken from the rolls in the purge.

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It is hardly my province to question the fiscal wizardry involved in this step; neither do I see any crucial civil liberties issue at stake. The magazine will continue to be sold on the newsstands and any scorned subscribers who cannot live without it will be able to sustain the habit by buying individual copies or rushing to the Public Library for free scrutiny.

What concerns me—as it must the bigger minds at Curtis—is how the news will be broken to faithful fans who, through no fault of their own except lack of social and financial status, are about to be branded unfit for continued receipt of the SEP through the mails.

I assume that the Curtis establishment, as an elementary matter of public relations, will feel obliged to assign personal emissaries to carry the deadly cancellation notices. One is tempted to imagine the dialogue that will ensue when Mrs. Myrtle Jones receives the envoy.

* * *

"Good morning, Mrs. Jones, I'm from the Saturday Evening Post—I have a letter for you."

"Oh, that's very nice, but it really isn't necessary—we're very old subscribers and we renew regularly every year."

"That, you see, is the problem, Mrs. Jones."

"You mean Tom let the subscription run out? He's getting so absent-minded. I'll take care of it right away."

"That isn't it, Mrs. Jones. I'm afraid we have to cancel your subscription. It's part of a new program at the magazine . . ."

"Now, young man, please stop playing jokes. I'm a very busy woman; I haven't even done my shopping yet."

"But it's true. They've asked me to read the letter to you."

"I've never heard of such nonsense. For years I've been turning young men like you away from my door, peddling all sorts of magazines that don't interest me. You're saying the Saturday Evening Post is tearing up my subscription?"

"No, just terminating it. Of course we'll pay you back for the issues you won't receive."

* * *

"And why were we chosen for this special recognition?"

"Oh, it's all explained in the letter—it's really not just you, it's many, many others, too. It's a matter of economics and costs . . . We are all deeply sorry, and I am here to express the company's very deep regrets."

"Now please explain how you decided to pick on us."

"Well, really on the basis of income and, you see, advertiser appeal . . . It's very complicated. I think we may be able to arrange to transfer your subscription to . . ."

"You transfer *my* subscription? After all the years we've been sending our checks in, even some times when we really couldn't afford it? . . . Now you say we're off the list because we're not fancy enough. It's humiliating."

"I assure you, madam, that we have no intention of revealing the names of those subscribers who have been, uh, cancelled. That will remain our secret. We are doing everything possible to spare you any embarrassment."

"That's very fine of you, but I couldn't care less . . ."

* * *

"May I at least leave the letter with you?"

"Young man, if that letter was signed by Benjamin Franklin himself, I wouldn't read it."

"Please understand, Mrs. Jones. I'm just doing my job."

"Yes, young man, I know. You probably don't even read the magazine. But you're lucky my husband wasn't around when you brought us this news; he has a very bad temper. He never liked that magazine, anyway. He won't even notice that you've left us."

"Oh, I am relieved to hear that, Mrs. Jones. I do hope you realize there is nothing personal about all this."

Mixup

From "The Second Neurotic's Notebook," by Mignon McLaughlin (Bobbs, \$2.75).

Life is a mixed blessing which we vainly try to unmix.
