

# MY BOOK AND HEART

BY MARGARET LYNN

ON the prairie one had time to read. I heard Arthur's mother say that there was so little time for children to read when they were going to school, and I wondered. I did n't see how there could be such a thing as not having time to read. You don't think about taking time to read — you just read. The only occasion when we thought of time was when we were hurrying through one book to get to another; for there was almost always another waiting, and holding out a fascinating promise that hastened our progress toward it. And then it was so quiet on the prairie. The general whooping of life was so far away that it did not call us from books with the insistence of its noise. Its activity became history or romance before it reached us.

Arthur's mother said, too, that the days were so much longer at the plantation than in town; and that also made me wonder. But, of course, it would account for Arthur's not having time to read. I was not strong on science, and I pictured the sun as rising at school-time in the city and setting just as Arthur got home again. Certainly Arthur had not read anything, except a few children's stories which we had left behind long since. We tried him in every department of literature and found him wanting everywhere. To him a poem was a piece to speak, and prose was something one found in the Fourth Reader. If he had not kept us in place by his superior knowledge of the world, we might have become priggish and pharisaic over his limitations.

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But, of course, there was no reason why any one should feel lofty over the simple and natural indulgence in reading. The only wonder, if there was one, was that any person could exercise such self-restraint as Arthur did. As for us, there were the books and there were the long summer days and the long winter evenings. Why not read and read again?

There were the books, to be sure. And by good fortune they were such as led us into the ways of literature. Of all libraries the most satisfying and the most lovable is not that obtained out of hand by one man in one period, but that which is made up of the accretions of years, and even of generations. A real library can hardly be got by any man in one life; it takes the successive tastes of grandfather and father and son, with possibly the happy inheritance of books chosen by collateral members of the family. Such a library is full of surprises and by-paths, and even of suggestive gaps that stimulate desire.

I suppose I say this because that is the kind of library the plantation held. It was not a very large collection; freighting books from the east in those days was too expensive. A book had to show reason why its passage should be paid. But, carefully limited as it was, such a library was not merely a library; it was a family tree mentalized, a racial epitome, a record of ancestral mind and taste. Grandfather and even great-grandfather had chosen and worn the books, great-uncles and dead-and-gone

cousins had thumbed and ruffled the leaves, tributary and confluent family lines had made contributions. Angular writing of generations before ours appeared on fly-leaves and margins, along with the glossy labels of far-away booksellers. Some of the children who visited us, like Arthur, did not think our library looked attractive. The sober shelves had a look of brown middle-aged respectability, very different from the enticing variegation of a shelf of new novels in their parti-colored dress, or so-called children's books, garish affronts to childish intelligence. Another advantage of living on the prairie is that new books do not wander in every day, and that there is no public library. One has time to read a good book twice.

The foundation of our library was laid by the austere taste of a New England great-grandfather and his evidently like-minded son; the taste of a people who did not care for any nonsense. It is hard to believe that there ever was a time when people really read Cotton Mather and Roger Williams and Jonathan Edwards, especially grown persons who could read what they liked. Even *Charlotte Temple*, doubtless a concession to frivolity on my grandfather's part, seemed to us to show a very rudimentary sense of what was entertaining. An inheritance from a Covenanter ancestor lent moral support and sympathy to the New Englander's literary taste. From him came the various Lives of Cameronians and Covenanters generally, the treasured copy of the Covenant, numerous 'Confessions of Faith,' copiously and devotedly annotated, a rich collection of sermons and letters, histories of all stages of Presbyterianism, — between which and Royalist Scott we became hopelessly bewildered, — and dear yellow, old collections of Scotch poetry. He must have been a man worth knowing,

that ancestor, with his love of songs and of sermons — his *Tales of the Borders* and his tattered *Kilmeny* and well-worn Rutherford's *Letters*.

Then from some romantic feminine source — a great-aunt, I think — came volumes of early Victorian verse, with faint sentimental pencil lines on the margins, and an occasional 'Sweet!' or 'True!' in a genteel hand. From her, too, must have come the *Ladies' Book of Anecdotes* and certain 'best-sellers' of another time, now long past their day, like dried-up and passé toasts; such as *Children of the Abbey* and *Alonzo and Melissa*. We did n't have to open these books to know whose name we should find daintily set on the fly-leaf. They were small, usually, with faded colored bindings and gold stamping. Lady hands had held them and slender pencils had marked them, and they had come to us unsmudged and unthumbd. There was no likeness between them and the plain shaky brown books of the Puritan or the Covenanter.

Other books had wandered to us through other by-paths. There was a little group, only a shelf-full, which stood always by itself, the scanty mental food of a young uncle — or was it a cousin? Whoever it was, he was not much talked of now, and we had a general impression that he had been a sort of ne'er-do-well, if such a sober and practical person as an uncle could be a ne'er-do-well. But anyway he had been a dilettante youth who had passed away before he had reached the period of settled-down taste, and had left, to fix his reputation forever, such signs of his judgment as N. P. Willis and Fanny Fern, and several highly-colored *Annals*, and novels whose once up-to-date flippancy was now an out-of-date flatness. Poor uncle or whoever he was! Beside his Puritan ancestor's collection his looked garish, indeed, and he never could return to correct the impression

he continued to make by his youthful following of fashion in reading. The shelf might have furnished a suggestive object-lesson to the thoughtful grown-up, and made him wonder how his own library would look to the critic of a generation later, and whether it would be worth handing down to his heirs.

Different from these was the sweet maiden collection which my mother had brought with her to her new home and which still stood in her room: the *Flower of the Family* and *A Garland of Verse*, and Mrs. Hemans and Jean Ingelow and à Kempis and the *Christian Year* and the *Golden Treasury*, and others. When, with chastened mind, I was spending an afternoon in retreat, I went to her room and read those books.

And then, of course, there were my father's own volumes, gathered through all his years; books thoughtfully collected and soberly hoarded, as by a man who thought a good book a precious thing. There were few among them that had not won their way to place, and none — save the few forbidden books — that could not safely be ours. A man with half a dozen young readers coming on does not choose his books lightly.

All these and others that I cannot account for now, were our range. There were not many among them all that we did not investigate, first or last. We smiled, in more sophisticated years, to think that there had been a time when we judged a book by a merely superficial standard, such as the attractiveness of its title or the amount of dialogue it contained. But the introductory mistake we made as to the probable relative value of the solid paragraphs of *Robinson Crusoe* and the promising pages of conversation in *Sandford and Merton* or the Rollo Books, for instance, taught us a salutary lesson.

The fact is, we found, it is unwise

to pass by any book without a thorough investigation. I shuddered later to think that I had made three separate attempts to read *Ivanhoe* before I could get past its initial lesson in linguistics and politics. And what if I had not made a fourth effort, — with certain saltatory movements that took me past this barrier! For a long time we ignored the golden *History of Granada*, supposing it to be an ordinary history, and the luscious *Life of John Martin*, bound in dull brown with plain lettering, which we had passed over as a mere biography. Such mistakes as these made us wary. Diamonds might lurk anywhere. It behoved us to be up and looking.

And look we did. I doubt if there was at last a single dramatic element left undiscovered in all our small library. The old books were of two classes generally: books whose soft yellow pages with their frayed edges fell open of themselves, showing cleavage most notably at places which we at once knew must be the best; and books with starchy unhandled leaves and creaking protesting backs, books which had kept an unbroken newness through all the generations that had owned them.

There was something pathetic, I thought at first, about an unread book, standing on a shelf in endless waiting, and offering its unused meaning year after year to unasking owners. I used to take one down occasionally and make an attempt to read it — like Sordello with his pitiful caryatides. But I generally found that there had been reason for its rejection by my predecessors. The ancestral literary taste was not to be despised, I found as the result of my investigations, and I readily returned the stiff lines of *The Pleasures of the Imagination* and the moralities of Martin Tupper, to their accustomed repose. But there continued to be for

me a wistful look about even the back of a neglected book.

On the other hand, if a book were ragged and wobbly in its covers, that was reason enough for examining it. It had evidently been popular and could probably show cause. It was so we found *Pilgrim's Progress*, a mere tatter of a book, and we never had reason to regret the time we spent upon it. Until we were absolutely certain that a book was essays or science or theology or a footless stuff called philosophy, we gave it a fair chance. Almost any book has something in it, except such as these. Even diaries and biographies, for the judicious and persevering skipper, have dramatic moments. All books, in our judgment, were to be tasted.

Of course there were Dickens and Scott and Mrs. Whitney and beloved Miss Alcott. But reading them was like getting money out of a bank. The true searcher for gold finds it in the rough and in unassured places. There was real excitement in turning the pious leaves of the unpromising *Life of James Renwick*, with expectation of entertainment low, and then suddenly finding him escaping across the moss-hags, his horse guided by a Power that evidently approved of his views on church polity, while the prelatial Claverhouse men in pursuit floundered up to their shoulders and gave up the chase. Such a finding as that stimulated us to make acquaintance with other Covenanters, men who lived a life of daring and risk and escape — or dramatic martyrdom — that put them in a class with Robinson Crusoe himself.

Even in the dun-colored old *History of the Covenanters* there would suddenly appear, set in between dull acts of Parliament and unexciting politics, a secret conventicle in the mist and the heather, where the excitement of the hazard run must have compensated for the solemnity of paraphrase and

sermon. And then would come in those Claverhouse men again, and the Presbyterians would drop to cover in the heather or bracken, except the few who were always taken and led away to the boot or the maiden — instruments we tried in vain to visualize or invent.

Patches like this would enliven any history. We could not help regarding them as accidents in historical narrative, which left to itself would cling by nature to the dullness of acts of Parliament and the monotonous performances of Whig and Tory. But accident or not, such bits were too delightful for us to chance missing them, and led us to the examination of other histories in the hope that they, too, were enlivened by dramatic episodes.

Nor were we unrewarded. The divorce trial of Katherine of Aragon, and the simple elemental Henry neatly disposing of wife after wife; Lady Jane Grey and her Greek and her execution; Luther meeting the devils on the roofs of Worms — so our confused imagination syncopated the affair; the adorable Mary, irresistible we did n't know why, Mary with her Rizzio and her Bothwell, and her two small hands clasping her own slender neck; the great Catherine, so naughty the books did n't tell what she was up to; Catherine Douglas, another Catherine, sacrificing her white arm for a bolt to the rude door to save the kingly James; the good-looking Charles stepping out through the wall to have his handsome head cut off — episodes like these enriched the sparsely-set pages of history, and partly reconciled us to the moments when we were bidden to read it.

In fact, except the negligible classes I have named, there is scarcely any book that does not have something interesting in it. The whole art of being entertained lies in two things — in being a good skipper and in seeing things as they are. There is *Pilgrim's Progress*,

for instance. However it may be for the pious or literary grown-up, there is no book that more invites skipping on the part of the discriminating ten-year-old. The long array of Golden Texts and dialogued religion seems made to be skipped. What is the use of having Sundays on week-days? But, ah me, the Delectable Mountains and the House Beautiful!—do you have such a rested feeling anywhere else in literature?—and the country of Beulah and the Valley of the Shadow of Death! Everything in the book could be seen as plain as day. Prudence and Piety and Charity looked like some pretty maids I had seen once at a hotel, and Mercy looked like the mild young wife of our doctor, and Christian looked like just any man. They were all such genuine flesh-and-blood that I could have pinched them. But that was no credit to either Bunyan or us. When you are ten, things easily turn into flesh-and-blood. It does n't matter much whether books are illustrated or not. After you have shut them up once you can hardly remember whether the pictures were on the page or in your head.

L Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, however, was illustrated. I don't suppose it would ever occur to any wise person selecting five hundred books or five yards of books or five hundred pounds of books for the juvenile, to include that gory chronicle among them. I am sure there is no warrant in pedagogical principles for supposing that any normal child could be induced to read it. But we did, and more than once—whether on advice or not, I don't remember. What pleasure any youngster could find in that long panorama of flayings and fagots and rackings and blood and stern refusals to recant, I cannot surmise now. But we were so well acquainted with it that the martyr became for us a distinct type of person,

like the gypsy or mover or robber, the sort of person whose function it was to have his head cut off bloodily or be hung on a pole upside down.

As I say, the book was illustrated with an innocent art that spared no detail, and an incongruity of martyrly expression that modified the horror, even for us. The chubby bishop of Arethusa, seated aloft on a clothes-basket, evidently borrowed for the moment from the family washing, and gazing in round-eyed and bewildered perturbation at an approaching flock of something, whether bees or buzzards I don't know; a thickly whiskered but knock-kneed persecutor, neatly removing Francis Gross's muscular tissue with an implement that looked like a milk-skimmer; one of the seventy martyrs, a sample, I suppose, coyly dropping a corner of her round chin on the blade of the broad corn-knife that was cutting her head off; that was the sort of picture that illuminated religious fervor for us. I suppose we found a novel as well as a dramatic element in the suffering,—a thing that lay entirely outside of our experience; and enjoyed at the same time the opportunity for indignation against the persecutors,—a large righteous sort of feeling. Anyway, we fell back on that book on many Sunday afternoons when public opinion appeared to demand that we read something appropriate to the season. It seemed to be a religious work.

There is nothing in our later explorations among books that is comparable to the delight of those early searchings. The more undirected they were the better. Of course when They, who were supposed to know everything, gave us a book and bade us become acquainted with it, we assumed that it must possess some well-established merit, and set ourselves to find it. Sometimes we found it and sometimes we did not. There was *Sandford and*



*Merton.* I don't know that any reason was offered for inflicting that book upon us, except that it contained useful information, — no reason at all, — and that our grandfather Johnson had had to read it when he was a boy. I leave it to any lover of real entertainment if either of those reasons was sufficient. I don't see now how my grandfather's generation grew up with the incubus of that book upon them. It is a poor book that can't be read more than once, but I really thought I should rather forget how to read than follow a second time the misadventures of the dull Tommy or the noble example of the paragonic Harry.

Afterwards I read somewhere the life of this informational Mr. Day, and how he educated a girl to be his wife, and when she was all properly educated and ready she would not wear the kind of clothes he prescribed and so would not do, and how three other young ladies in succession refused him, and I was glad of it. I wished forty young ladies had refused him and he had died of cumulative broken heart.

That was the kind of book that might be imposed upon us when officious elders selected our reading. In spite of the generally accepted view of Their omniscience, I sometimes suspected them of offering us books that they had not read themselves, and never would read. *Sandford and Merton* seemed evidence enough of that. But generally such direction as we got was largely negative. There were certain books that we might not read — openly — but it was usually assumed that when we were reading we were safe. So we were left to the long joys of the discovery of literature, joys that were incomparable and manifold.

There is no other delight like that of finding something fine for yourself where no one has pointed it out to you. You may be fairly sure that in time all

the substantial and sensible merits of literature will be shown you more or less forcibly, and that you will have an opportunity to test them for yourself. But there may be a thousand shy or remote things that no one will ever tell you about. That is one reason why it is wise to search widely and unflaggingly. One gets to have a sweet proprietary interest in bits of literature discovered for one's self. Sometimes the treasures are so rare that one does not tell any one else about them at all. For me, I had a secret hoard of beauties that I did not discover even to John or Mary — Henry was quite out of the question, of course. In time these were taken from me by the annoying discovery that no end of people knew them already, that they were even vulgarized by common quoting.

One day, in prowling through an unpromising old gray book I found 'a green thought in a green shade.' That was a moment! I lived on the phrase for a day and returned to it for weeks afterward for sweet æsthetic sips. When I lay on the grass under the box-elder tree and looked up through its rather scanty leaves, I used to say that over to myself and wait for an appropriate thought, which never came. For years I thought it was my verse and only mine. Who else would think of looking into an old gray book for it? To that I added from time to time such sister joys as 'with the moon's beauty and the moon's soft pace.' That was a good bit to say to myself when I leaned from my window at night, after saying my prayers, to take a last look at the sky and postpone for an instant the undesired moment of final retirement.

I found that in a book of extracts. Books of extracts and quotations — the difference is that an extract is longer than a quotation — are excellent good things for the discoverer of literature. If you are taken with the sample you

can hunt up the whole fabric and find many joys in that way. They are great books for tasting. So it was I first discovered *Lalla Rookh* and the *Songs of Seven*. And while I was tracing the samples to their sources I might come upon other delights by the way that nothing had pointed me to. The excitement and happiness of exploration were endless. To Columbus the tinsel joy of finding America — my own discoveries for me! That thousands had already made them for themselves did not matter. And yet I did not show John and Mary everything I found.

The corner of the Forbidden Books added a zest and a perilous excitement to our explorations. The grown-ups certainly had curious notions about what it was inadvisable for children to read. I read a good many of the Forbidden Books, almost all of them, in fact, and found nothing bad in them. Some of them I found merely dull and returned them unfinished. I tasted Balzac, for example, but did n't like the taste. Of course in later years, with the tremendous knowledge gained by grown-upness, I should probably have coincided with Their view, but you have to know a good deal about badness in order to recognize it when you see it. If you are only young enough you can read almost anything, skimming lightly and safely over unguessed depths of wickedness. It really was Ellen and the elders whose reading should have been restricted.

But having books forbidden makes them irresistibly alluring, and adds the excitement of hazard to the reading of them. Did you never sneak a book away to read it, prudently sliding up the other books on the shelf so that no betraying gap might show? Did you never, for instance, read *Romola* under the bed in the spare bedroom, dividing your righteous condemnation of Tito with your own conscientious scruples,

and your fear for Romola's safety with shivers lest you yourself be caught? Did you never make your way through *Vanity Fair* by cautious half-hour snatches, fearful every moment lest some one in authority should interrupt?

There was one horrible day when I sought the tranquil though badly-lighted seclusion under the spare bed, forgetting that one of the frequent visiting preachers was sojourning with us. I had reached the third chapter of *Children of the Abbey*, thousands of miles from bed-springs and figured carpet, when the preacher entered. I had forgotten his existence. But there he was, and there he stayed. He read and he wrote; he even practiced a sermon, — not much of a sermon, I thought. And all the while I, rolled to the very limits of my retreat, waited for him to go. What if he should, like another minister that once stayed with us, do without supper! That was one of the things I was afraid of. The other was that he might pray. We had wondered a good deal what the ministers did when they stayed in their room so much, and had decided that they spent most of their time in vocalized devotion. At least, that is what the preachers in the Lives did. We had even paused outside the door sometimes, when no scrupulous elder was in sight, to listen for suggestive sounds from within. But it would have been one thing to hear him from outside and quite another to be shut in the room with him. I simply could not stand it if he prayed. It would be unthinkable embarrassing. And besides, his position of devotion might be an unfavorable one for me.

But this preacher was apparently not of the praying kind. At least he did not use this opportunity, but finally went off to the orchard to look for Red Junes, and I escaped. The only lesson I drew from that episode was, not to frequent

the spare room when we had company. I finished *Children of the Abbey* in the wheat-bin, and got it back to the house undiscovered.

It never occurred to us at that time that the matter of literary quality had anything to do with the limitations laid on our reading. I was much puzzled during my surreptitious perusal of *Fair Women*, to account for the prejudice that existed against it among the censors of our reading. We supposed that a book was forbidden on purely moral grounds, and were surprised and disappointed to find no palpable wickedness in it. We always hoped to find in one of them some time an unrestricted view of villainy such as would entirely satisfy our hungry imaginations. We craved a novelty in rascality that would really startle us, but never found it. I don't know how old you are when you begin to discover Canons of Taste, or whether you discover them for yourself or have them laid upon you, like the social conventions. But there is a pleasant time before you are aware of them and are still untrammelled and unashamed in all your verdicts. Then *John Gilpin's Ride* is not funny and *We are Seven* is, and *The Ancient Mariner* is a nice spooky fairy tale, and *Pilgrim's Progress* is in the same class with the *Arabian Nights*, and *Little Women* is about the best book ever written. An interesting book is an interesting book, in whatever company you find it.

There is nothing that furnishes greater promise of continued satisfaction in life than to know that whatever happens you can always read. However other interests may fluctuate or

fail, there are always books, and there is always an interesting one if you only search long enough for it. It gives a sort of certainty to life, and an assurance of its continued likableness, to know that there need be no dull interstices in it. Games may flag, and brothers and sisters may have moments of slightly damaged amiability, but entertainment need not pause while there are still books to read. If there are no new ones you can always read *David Copperfield* again.

The shaky old books were none the less shaky when we were through with them, especially if we had forgotten them in the orchard or the cottonwood grove for a few days at a time. But the orchard was the best place in summer, I found. I found, too, that it was a good thing to disappear into it early in the afternoon, before any one thought to say where was that child, and it really was time she was learning to sew or crochet or something. I don't know why it does n't tire your elbows or your back, when you are ten, to lie on the grass with a book in front of you for a whole afternoon. After you have passed another decade or two, you don't care much for the position.

Those orchard afternoons! When I established a pile of apples beside me and turned the first leaf of my book, the sun was high above me. Then a minute or two passed, and some one was calling me, and the sun was almost down, and the apples were all gone. That was the only thing that surprised me, however. I had been in a far country and the lapse of time was only natural.



# THE MAN WHO FAILED

BY HELEN ORMSBEE

## I

As Robert Brockton started across the bridge toward Brooklyn, he turned and glanced hopelessly at the skyscrapers behind him. In the gathering darkness they loomed, huge symbols of the triumphant force of New York. Brockton shrank from them because he knew that he was a failure; a failure in this country of ambition, this city of success.

The knowledge had come to him that afternoon in a flash of self-comprehension, and, in the blindness which followed, he had clung to one resolve: he would face the truth.

'Your department has n't made good,' Adams had said. He was the head of the firm, a short-spoken but kindly man. 'I know it's new, and we've taken that into account. But—' He paused and finished with a regretful upward inflection, 'we want results.'

The room swam before Brockton. In the next moment, he lived over his joy at his recent promotion. 'I'm — I'm not satisfactory?' he asked.

'That's it,' replied Adams reluctantly. 'We're going to put Fehrmann in your place,' he hurried on. 'I like you, Brockton, but you're not the man for the position. There's not enough go to you. Only last week you let that contract with Palmer slip through your fingers.'

Brockton nodded. What Adams said was true.

'Then I am to go back to my old place?' he asked.

'Well — no, the fact is, there is n't anything for you.'

It was then that Brockton realized his failure. He did not speak; he had forgotten Adams's presence. In the silence, his employer studied him. Brockton, in the late thirties, had iron-gray hair; straightforward, intelligent gray eyes, set wide apart beneath the forehead of a thinker; a nose strong enough, and a mouth and jaw sufficiently well-proportioned. It was the expression which puzzled Adams: keen, but not practical; quick, but too sensitive; far-sighted, but not shrewd.

The senior partner, owing to himself with annoyance that he had promoted Brockton not because of his fitness, but because he liked him, broke the silence.

'We've divided the work you used to do among four or five men. They crowd it in with their regular routine and it saves a salary. That's why there's no place for you.' He leaned back in his chair and continued, 'When we organized the draughting department, I put you at the head of it because I wanted to give you a lift. You'd been with us five years. It was a big move up for you. Jameson thought you were n't suited to this work; he wanted Fehrmann all the time. But I said I'd give you your chance.'

'I've had it,' said Brockton. His shoulders drooped and he leaned heavily on the desk beside him. He was confronted with his own inability, and he despised it with all the intensity of his American training.