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ON WORKS OF REFERENCE

By Aline Kilmer

LALAGE, who lives with me, is occasionally moved to bitter lamentations. Anyone who lived with me would lament bitterly on occasion. As a philosopher I can realize this without undue heartburning. But I claim that Lalage is unreasonable in doing this, because she does not lament those things that are really lamentable.

Her chief cause of complaint is that my library contains no works of reference. In vain I tell her that I have a dictionary, the finest of all dictionaries. She only asks me coldly to produce it, and I—I cannot. And she will not accept my unsupported word. I am unable to produce the evidence because of all my books that dictionary is the most butterfly-like. It settles now here, now there, and remains so short a time in each place that Lalage, who has lived with me for eight months, claims with apparent sincerity that she has never seen it. When I have seen it myself I cannot say that I have paid much attention to it except to experience a pleasantly possessive thrill. I never consult it. I never need to. Usually I can grasp the meaning of an unfamiliar word

by the context and as for spelling—well, I am a good speller. On those rare occasions when I really need to look up a word, my dictionary being so much the will-o'-the-wisp, I have a better and more informative way of looking it up. I take some book that I feel sure will somewhere or other contain the word and I read through it until my search is rewarded. In this way I refresh my memory of books that I have read and even sometimes read books that otherwise I never should have read.

Recently I have been informed that this practice of mine is one of the many admirable methods of the Chinese. To find the proper use of a word they search the classics. If that word does not appear in the classics, so much the worse for the word. It dies.

From the actual use I have made of my dictionary I have got little but sorrow. Many excellent words are ruined by too definite a knowledge of their meaning. There is the tragic case of "hectic". I had always considered it a highly expressive word. I had used it joyously for years to mean a convenient combination of "nervous", "excitable", "feverish". One ill-starred day I looked it up and I have never been able to use it since. Its actual meaning is so far removed from its meaning as used by me and the vulgar generally that I cannot even remember what it was. No one could be expected to remember it. It simply has nothing to do with the case.

But it is not only a dictionary that Lalage would have me possess. She thinks I should have an encyclopædia. Now this is really the height of folly. She knows that I have not sufficient room for those books that I already own. An encyclopædia is ugly and cumbersome. Also it is an expensive thing.

And to an encyclopædia there is the same serious objection that applies to most works of reference. It is too practical and too detailed. What information the average human mind might conceivably be able to grasp is smothered under a mass of technicalities and so lost.

I have, for instance, read the article on navigation in an encyclopædia. It was, doubtless, sound and, as such articles go, well constructed. Far be it from me to offer any impertinent, half baked criticism upon it. But the fact remains that not one shred of it clung in my mind. What knowledge I have of seamanship, and it is ample for my needs, I got from "The Hunting of the Snark". From a work like that you learn indelibly. You learn with the Bellman. In company with that intelligent but untrained gentleman, I never knew whether an east wind blew from the east or to the east. It is not a thing one can easily inquire about. One might safely guess at it if it were not for the technical terms. The phrase "due east" is certainly confusing if not deliberately misleading. But after one reading of "The Hunting of the Snark" the truth is fixed in your mind.

I do not think I am peculiar in this. Is there anyone who has not learned more history from historical romances than from the pages of histories themselves? I believe not.

It might be possible, with a little research, to draw up a list of such substitutes to fill the places of all dull reference books on library shelves. Dozens of delectable ones flash into my mind. But I hold my hand because if I presented this list I should then be in the despicable position of having perpetrated a work of reference. This I have vowed I shall never do.

So I claim that Lalage is unreason-

able. But I think privately that it is better so. Unreason never annoys me. I have with it unfailing patience. If Lalage came to me and complained that my housekeeping compared unfavorably with that of Mrs. Jellyby — if in these benighted days there are many who do not recognize Mrs. Jellyby I am glad of that, because they won't know what I mean — if she pointed out that I begin a thousand things that I never finish, if she showed me that though I am potentially a capable person I never accomplish anything, she would be perfectly right. Reason would be all on her side. But then I should be very angry.

SURRENDER BOOKS

By Thomas L. Masson

THERE is a class of books that nobody apparently has ever thought of grouping before. Yet they have a very definite place in the mind of each one of us who is devoted to reading, and to know what they are is to have information of great value. They are what I may term surrender books. And presently I hope by example to explain them very definitely.

Of course, lists of books that one ought to read always vary according to taste, and nothing indeed has involved so much controversy as what these books should be. There cannot in the nature of things be any uniform method of selection, this always depending upon individual taste, previous education, heritage, environment, etc. But it seems to me that it is possible to create a new standard which deals with surrender books alone, and I should think that lovers of books generally would be fairly well agreed as to what these are. We