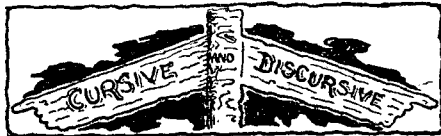


The New Books Travel

(Continued from preceding page)

a nine-months' world-tour, to the "Dearly Beloved People at Home," descriptive of the sights they saw and the places visited. The letters were not originally intended for circulation beyond the immediate family and friends. Never once does the guileless author seem to suspect that he is missing a single attraction of the universal show unwinding before him, although it is apparent that he is being directed to none but the cut-and-dried features of the tour books. He employs the rubber-stamp busily in recording his impressions, and rarely bubbles over ecstatically.



"THE whole year sets apace," as Rossetti put it in his most famous ballad. We recently returned to the city from northward wearing what seemed to us the sole remaining straw hat of the summer. Straws show which way the wind blows, and, to crib another line, this time from Villon, "the wind has blown them all away." Before we know it, almost, it is autumn, and wood-fires and evenings round the lamp are very near. The reading season begins again.

This winter we should like to get through at least one book, be it old or comparatively new, that would really prove solid nourishment. Summer passes with its light novels. And the youth of the nation turns to more serious books perforce. We older ones need read no longer according to anyone's command, and hence most of us follow the path of least resistance in this regard. We fritter away the evenings that draw in. The world's main occupation is money-making and its evenings are tired. It seems the accepted thing to believe that only the lightest (often synonymous with the trashiest) literature truly relaxes. Well, that is all as you look at it. After all, it is all in forming a taste.

We have never advocated reading "for improvement." This method produces amateur pedants or "serious thinkers," whose thinking is, in reality neither deep nor broad. But it is just as easy to get interested in a work with some vestiges of style and some observations above platitude, as it is to skim the average fiction magazine or keep abreast only of the biggest sellers. Not that a "best seller" may not often be an excellent book—but that, too often, its very breadth of appeal is an appeal to that aforesaid love of the reading line-of-least-resistance in most people.

So far as we go, ourselves, we are, in the main, a fraud. We share with the most average of readers an ability to waste our time on the perusal of trash that sometimes almost makes us blush. There are plenty of great books that we know glibly by name and appreciate only vicariously. Hence, these tears. Tears of recognition and resolve! As Chesterton puts it in his "Ballade of Suicide"

*I never read the works of Juvenal,
I think I shall not hang myself today.*

There are plenty of other unread authors that shall preserve us from succumbing to the despair born of our ignorance of much great literature. No, we think we shall not hang ourselves this winter, for we have never read any great English author complete. In fact, we have only sampled any one a comparatively few times. We have sampled fairly widely; but it was only sampling.

One could, however, repair one's ignorance rather rapidly if one adopted any really systematized method of reading. At least, so we are always assuring ourselves. "The long winter evenings" are of course the very best period in which to evolve such a system. Yet, with the passing of the age of leisure and the day of a few great authors, any such systematization has grown quite a complicated matter. The horizon of our own period is a wider and more amazing one. Ten things shout for attention where one whispered before. Our energies of observation, analysis and judgment are dispersed over an increasing variety of subjects. One cannot even begin to commence to know very much of the world's literature past and present, with the little time at one's disposal.

But then, what, after all, are we trying to be? Literary encyclopædias? That way of looking at the subject is basically wrong. A love of literature is simply the formation of a sound taste for excellent writing and the true cultivation of this taste upon every opportunity. And a love of literature, though it argues inevitably an informed process of comparison, need not necessarily argue what we loosely term "scholarship." For some seem, actually, born with good literary taste, while others have to labor arduously to achieve it. In certain cases heredity transmits the gift, without desert, perhaps, on the part of the recipient, who chooses, as if by inspired instinct, the gold from the dross. Time is economized for these fortunate dabblers. By instinct again they make the most of their reading time. Where others have sometimes laboriously to educate themselves up to the point of appreciation of certain perfections in writing, these others (profiting by ancestral culture) gravitate naturally toward accomplished craftsmanship and superior technique. To these fortunate ones the great books of the world speak immediately, even as the intelligence comprehends immediately. Slower methods of plodding comparison are skipped.

But these, of course, are the exceptions. With most of us, when we will to abandon the line of least resistance in our reading, we find the merits of many works counted great quite obstinate at first to our comprehension. We feel an obduracy in the most laurelled authors that, often, we must work hard to overcome. Then we may be sure that we are not approaching their work in the right spirit. We are not taking them upon their own terms. We are not exercising our intelligence concerning them. Even as an intelligent man is apt to become non-communicative in the presence of the conversation of a fool, so these dead minds seem to sense some insincerity in our approach to them and withdraw their real communications. Their statements are before us. The words on the page are the same to us as to any reader; but because we cannot do our part in establishing a mutual understanding—even if only to disagree—the light has gone out of the text.

These random remarks are suggested by the thought of mental struggles bound to occur in winter lamplight on the part of all those who intend, as do we, to read to a little more purpose this coming season. But, of course, it is the baldest of platitudes to say that nothing worth winning is ever won without effort. And time is really too short upon this fevered planet always to be contented with second or third best. Heaven knows we are fussy and hard enough to please about many things of less real importance than the language on which we feed our minds.

The power of human language can be pondered in a thousand different aspects. Only as we come to know its potency in various types of great literature do we become really fit to communicate our thoughts to each other in daily speech. Only then, indeed, do we become able to appreciate the colors and rhythms and cacophonous effects of the common babble. The study of a variety of literary styles adds enormously to the interest of all we hear. That interest no longer resides solely in the information conveyed but in the whole process and architecture (so to speak) of its communication. And suddenly it is as if a thousand details in the decoration of daily life sprang into evidence where the prospect formerly had been bare and flat. Language has such strange offices and powers. The study of all that resides in its complex rhythms should be a fascination forever!

If we approach more solid nourishment in reading in such an attitude, without undue pomp and ceremony, the doors of the classics may not prove so obdurate. Here are persons using the very tongue in which we speak with a command that reveals its resources to us. It is always a pleasure to watch, say, a perfect athlete at some sport in which we ourselves are but a mere dabbler. Just so should it be a pleasure to watch the champion athletes of language display feats beyond our own puny efforts. At the bottom of all real human achievement is a profound realization of the power of the word. As we endeavor to develop that realization in ourselves so do we become the best lovers of literature. Not so thoroughly informed, perhaps, as some others, but going straight to the heart of the matter.

W. R. B.

The Salad Bowl

Philadelphia! Is not the very name with its pentasyllabic suavity a rebuke to hustle and confusion? On the top of the steps of one genteel old clubhouse stood a butler in a mulberry coat conning the street with a pair of field-glasses. He looked west, and he looked east, then shut his glasses satisfied that there was no one in town. Of course ordinary people were strolling along just as they do in the London West End in August, but that butler did not notice them. It was a pretty Mayfair sort of sight.

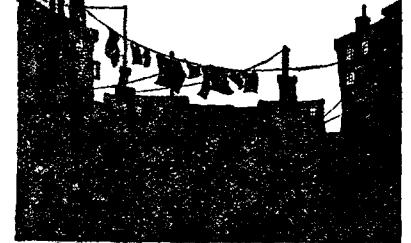
"The cream of the aristocracy live in this street," said our taxi-driver, "and there's more cream," he continued, "round the corner."—From *The Manchester Guardian*.

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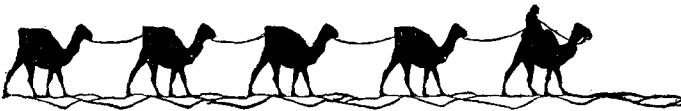
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A re-reading club has been organized by M. F. in Philadelphia, whose material will consist of "books of human interest which bear a second and third reading with profit." They ask me for novels that challenge the mind of the reader to such action, and as the group is made up of men and women of widely varying experience, the books should have something of a universal appeal.

ANY reader looking back over his experience with books finds that certain of them have grown with his growth and satisfied him, at wide intervals, for widely different reasons. "The Wind in the Willows," a complete experience to an imaginative child, provides him in later life with an unsuspected key to what England means to Englishmen, let alone the depths of human nature that come to light in the animals. Reading Hans Christen Andersen now I wonder what I loved him for as a child, he is so thoroughly grown-up. The novels of George MacDonald are most of them like this, and I recommend to this group his "Lilith," just published here (Dutton) in the edition commemorative of his centenary. I hope, by the way, that the recent publication by the Dial Press of the charming biography "George MacDonald and His Wife" may stimulate a revival of interest in G. M. He is timeless enough to be modern.

"Poems for Youth," selected by William Rose Benét (Dutton), is not only a book of unbackneyed and representative American poems, but through his introductory notes, a running commentary on the development of American poetry. Of "Jungle Days" (Putnam), I need but say that William Beebe wrote it, unless there are school libraries that do not know what they are missing if they have not what he writes. "The English Speaking Nations," by Morris and Wood (Oxford University Press) is a "study in the development of the commonwealth ideal," good food for young readers in the countries whose landmarks of national policy it traces, these being England, Canada, South, East, and West Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and the United States, with chapters on Egypt and India. And there is a new edition of Dan Beard's famous "American Boy's Handy Book" (Scribner), with valuable additions.

M. P., Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Z. C., Richmond, Cal., ask for books on entertainments for church fairs and similar activities with an admission fee.

The latest of these is "Make Your Bazar Pay," by Emily Rose Burt (Harper), coming out in time to arrange the campaign complete from soliciting contributions, arranging with local merchants, through decorations, financing and publicity. "A Book of Entertainments and Theatricals," by Helena Dayton and Louise Barratt (McBride), is a compendium of advice on fairs, reunions, club dinners, plays with their costumes, scenery and make-up, decorations—in a word, everything an entertainment committee asks for. "Stunts of Fun and Fancy," by Elizabeth Hanley (Franch), is a pamphlet with a number of new scenarios and directions for performance of entertainments. They can be performed very simply and with almost no preparation, or developed into quite elaborate affairs. The "Up to Date Social Affairs," in Mrs. H. B. Linscott's book with this title (Jacobs) are such as would be carried out by the entertainment committee of a club or church with programs to present regularly and often to about the same people. I admit that under some of these showers, conundrum luncheons and "crazy nites" I should just curl up and die, but that has not kept me from advising it to several committees who have put it to use. "Parties for Occasions," by Claire Wallis and Nellie R. Gates (Century), is for younger hostesses and more especially for school and vacation gaieties, but the ideas could be easily adapted to church suppers and sociables.

"Ritual and Dramatized Folkways," by Ethel Jesson and Beatrice Becker—no, no relation—(Century), though intended for schools and camps, could be used quite as well for church and Sunday school activities or by clubs; the material drawn from familiar sources of folklore, popular dance and well known poems, makes of these pantomimes, dramatizations and ballets of surprising charm. The prettiest are the dance-songs such as the Chauve Souris introduced to us.

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