

Some Observations on Reading

BY DR. EDWIN MIMS

In the current number of Putnam's Monthly there is a striking article on the "Reading Habit in the United States." The author presents statistics with regard to the books taken from public schools and society libraries, and finds that for every 100 inhabitants the people of Massachusetts take out 243 books annually, those of New York 155, of Tennessee 10, of North Carolina 6, of Mississippi. The showing is not a good one for the Southern States, even when every discount is made for the unavailability of statistics, the lack of public libraries in the South and the failure to take into account private libraries. Any such facts should be supplemented by inquiry as to the nature of the books read. There has been much discussion in recent magazines of the deterioration of public taste as evinced by the books most in demand in libraries.

Whatever may be the facts in the case—and I am not inclined to be pessimistic—such a study inevitably suggests the question: why is it that more men and women do not read the best books? In colleges and high schools there has been during the past decade a notable development in the study of literature, but many teachers of English have been disappointed that the reading habit is not continued by students after they leave college. The establishment of libraries in our larger towns and the increase in the number of literary clubs have given opportunity for the cultivation of literary taste; and yet even now one does not often meet with people to whom the reading of good books is a source of recreation, enlightenment, and power. Lack of time, lack of money to procure books, the indiscriminate reading of new books, a general failure to estimate properly the value of literature—all these are partial explanations of the fact that comparatively few know the joy and profit of reading. For those who urge a lack of time as an obstacle to culture it is scarcely necessary to cite the well known illustrations of great men in all professions who have found time even in the midst of very busy lives to read the best literature. It might be well for some of us to estimate the amount of reading that could be done if only a few minutes should be set apart each day. There are people in North Carolina whom one may readily think of as illustrating what may be done in the direction of self-culture by those who may have had or may not have had the advantages of college training.

A COMMENDABLE CUSTOM.
On the train the other day I found one of the most prominent lawyers of the State reading a volume of Kipling. He told me that it was his invariable custom while traveling to take with him some good book; in the course of a few years he had read a surprisingly large number of volumes. One of the best known preachers in the State always puts into his traveling bag some book or books, which he manages to read before he returns; I was astonished one day to hear how many books he had read in this way. I know a young

woman whose life is much given up to the duties of her life, but who in the course of a winter read through the plays of Shakespeare in chronological order. The illustrations might be multiplied of those who have found time for self-cultivation even in leisure moments. The most striking example is a prominent young editor and writer of the State who by careful economy of his time and by knowing what to read has made himself one of the best educated and most useful men in the State. With some a more serious obstacle than the lack of time is the lack of money. It is surprising, however, what a small amount of money will do towards securing a reasonably satisfactory library. The money spent in the purchase of costly subscription books and cheaper books sold by book agents would buy a goodly number of the best English classics. "Every man's Library," now being published by Dutton, "Little Masterpieces," edited by Mr. Bliss Perry, "Little Masterpieces of Poetry," selected and arranged by Henry Van Dyke, "Heart of Oaks Books," edited by Charles Elliot Norton, the Riverside Press editions of American authors, the Astor editions of prose and verse, might all be bought for considerably less money than Warner's "Library of the World's Best Literature," which is made up only of selections, half of which the average reader would not care for.

A WISE SELECTION.

I saw the private library of a teacher in a North Carolina town the other day that was an illustration of how one with a very modest salary may secure a selection of books that will be a source of constant joy and inspiration. No public library—however useful or necessary should take the place of one's own collection of books, however small. There are few things more precious than a library that is built up gradually by economy and good taste.

Instead of the best books, however, there is far too great a tendency now toward the reading of new books. It has become a mania that all lovers of literature need to struggle against. There are many people who would rather be fashionable than cultivated; they are an easy prey for the loud advertising book-seller. It often requires considerable courage to show one's ignorance of popular novels; I should like to see North Carolina old-fashioned enough to like the old books, and provincial enough not to read the books that find out the best selling books of the month in New York and Philadelphia. The running after fashionable literature causes one at times—not all the time by any means—to doubt the value of public libraries, so insistent is the demand for the newest books. Women's clubs are good institutions—very good—but it may be questioned whether some of them are doing much for literary culture when their lists of books are made up almost entirely of the latest fiction.

Not that I would follow Emerson's rule and read only such books as are two years old, for, as Mr. Bliss Perry has recently pointed out in a charming essay, there is something of value

in studying literary fashions; it is important to know the best that is being thought and said as well as the best that has been thought and said. A man who does not read Kipling and Stephen Phillips, Howells and Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page fails to understand some of the best tendencies of our contemporary life. But it needs to be said over and over again, that the only safe way to the formation of a healthy literary taste and the consequent enlargement of one's mental and spiritual horizon is to know at least the books in one's own language that have the stamp of a generation or more of popular and critical judgment. Dr. Dean Briggs, of Harvard, in a recent article says, after speaking of Scott, Jane Austen and Thackeray, "The mere mention of these names is enough to make us blush for the hours and days that we have wasted on yellow newspapers and yellow novels and trivial magazines."

Erwin Avery expressed with fine scorn his impatience of much that passes for culture: "Do you know what the majority of people—especially the younger people—will take from a library and read? The smelly, new book of course * * * Who's to talk, who's to talk, whose to talk book lore worth hearing after the boiler generation passes away? Who's to talk book lore worth hearing after the older generation passes away? * * * Who's to hold up a standard that understands—that reflects all that is not fine and strong and clear? A little while and who will there be down here to mock the loud, hued books that reek with wily-rotten sentiment?"

BOOKS OF THE HOUR.

Against the books of the hour, many of them sensational and others lacking intellectual and useful aims, we need to urge the books that are for all time. A classic is not necessarily a serious and weighty book, for there are classes, but those in humor, ranging from the broad American type to the delicate sketches of Charles Lamb, there are novels at once interesting, wholesome and uplifting; there are standard essays and biographies that do not oppress one with the mystery of all this unintelligible world; and there is poetry that does not demand subtle analysis. The ability to read, says Lowell, is "the key which admits us to the whole world of thought and fancy and imagination; to the company of saint and sage, of the wisest and the witliest of their wisest and the witliest moments." It would be easy to multiply quotations in which great men in all times and among all races have expressed their homage to literature. Their words are "a chorus of many voices in many tongues, a hymn of gratitude and praise, full of such piety and fervor as can be paralleled only in songs dedicated to the supreme Power. When we read the words not only of authors themselves, but of men of action as well, it is easy to see that many people do not properly appreciate literature as a vital factor in life, that they underrate the significance of the works of imagination in the practical life of the world. We have thought too often of a literary man as unbalanced, abnormal, eccentric, unrelated to the life about him. We have considered the poet or novelist or essayist as sentimental and ideal, when as a matter of fact he has the seeing eye and the understanding heart.

When we have once realized the value of literature to the life of in-

dividual and the commonwealth, we can understand why a career in industry like Andrew Carnegie would see that the reading of great books and the enjoyment of novels had brought him more happiness than all his wealth; why Phillips Brooks had such a consuming desire to know the full biography of man as it has found expression in literature; why to Glendora the study of any great author was a discipline of the intellect and the heart—a moral tonic; why to Wordsworth poetry was the heart and fine spirit to all knowledge. A more convincing argument than all rapturous praise of literature is the man or woman who loves books and knows how to use them. Fortunately are we if we know such! A certain editor in this State has caused many a man to read Bacon's essays, by reason of the quotations in his editorials or, better still, by the apt use of them in private conversation. I spent an evening not long ago with a Scotchman, who for two hours or more delighted his company with the songs and poems of Robert Burns. James Russell Lowell was not, as he said, the last of the bookmen, for here and there one finds a man of woman whose relish for a certain old master after beautiful to content with. A teacher of literature has some satisfaction in seeing the response of students to what is fine and uplifting in some poet or prophet. There are some who can never forget the golden morning of life when like Keats we found some new domain of the imagination, and "felt like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken."

THE DISILLUSIONMENT.

There is frequently a disappointment when one goes to an author of books after beautiful to content with one's enthusiastic praise. We do not always use good judgment in selecting books—we read a translation of Dante or Goethe, when we ought to read Shakespeare, we try Sartor Resartus when we ought to read Emerson's essays, Browning when Tennyson or Longfellow would be better. Addison rather than Irving, the good book leads to a better one; a book that means nothing to-day will mean much when we have brought to it a larger experience. Many a young person who reads rather than hears, and who finds the books finds a disenchantment, a disillusionment, when he comes face to face with some book that he has long wanted to read. More really ambitious readers break down here than at any other point. But is this disillusionment peculiar to literature? Who ever looked at Niagara for the first time and did not wonder why he had come so far to see it? And yet the longer you stay there the greater the beauty and the glory of the scene became. As one stands for the first time in the Louvre he experiences the same feeling; it is only after we have summoned to our aid some companion of some guide book, and spent many days in the study of the masterpiece of art, that the real significance of the pictures begins to dawn upon us. And so it is with great books; they do not give up their secrets at once; we must raise our souls to their level. We need help in the way of interpretation and comment. Hence the mistaken notion that when a book has been read once it has been read for all time. On the other hand it may be said that no great book has been read rightly that has not been read many times. It is better to read one great book with patience and whole-hearted absorption than to read many books in a purely superficial way.

So much may be said by way of an introduction to a series of articles that I have been asked to contribute to The Observer. It is my purpose

KELLY AND THE "SHAKE"

BILL GIVES AN EXPERIENCE

The Familiarity of Jim McDougall's Cow With the Corner of the House Leads to Some Funny Impressions—The Curious Effect of the "Shake" Had Upon Tom Maddox—Sandy and the Whole Family Do a Spirit Stunt.

BY P. C. WHITLOCK.

Old Bill Kelly has a knack of being mad fun of. He never passes the corner drug store in his little town that some of the boys sitting about the door and on the goods box in front do not stop him with some jest. The joke is always on Bill; but his good nature is his most conspicuous quality, and he never fails to make merry over his ups and downs and to see the humorous side of every situation.

He was hobbling along down the street one day, with his short-stem pipe in his mouth as usual, and an old guano sack thrown across his shoulder.

"Hey, there, Mr. Kelly, where you going?" said one of the corner fellows.

"Without turning his head or slackening his pace, in a show of unwonted haste, old Bill replied: 'Over the creek to gather my corn crop.'

"How much you going to make?" Here Bill stopped and turned back.

"Well, sir, I hope to get this sack full, of old Johnson's hogs ain't at the balance of it since yesterday."

Mr. Johnson is his wealthy neighbor.

"Poor Johnson," continued Bill, taking his pipe out of his mouth and finding a seat on the goods box, "of it was't for me, I dunno what he'd do for his hogs; but then he's poor an' I'm rich, so I have to help him along a little."

"Mr. Kelly, tell us about the earthquake," put in one of the boys.

"Which one?" said Bill. "We had one up home last night; but it wasn't nothin' but Jim McDougall's old cow scratchin' her neck agin' the corner of the house. I loved to shoot her with a load of fat meat and burn her old side off; but Jim, you know, he's such a fool, he must er got mad, an' so I jes went an' driv er off. But I ain't got'er put up with it any more they'd got out. The people was hol-

derin' everywhere. You could hear 'em for miles—some a-shoutin' some more night, 'll shoot her with fat meat sho', or pass."

"Pass," quipped one of the boys.

"Yea, bud, pass. Er you want to make a cow jump, you push about a handful of peas in yer gun, an' let her have it. That's the way I do 'em when they get to foamin' around my 'tater hill."

"Now we'll have the story about the earthquake," said one.

Bill re-lit his pipe.

"Well, you all know when the yethquake come, you that's old enough to recollect it, an' you that ain't have heard of it—the 'shake,' they call it, I hadn't never heard of one of the things afore that night. We had all jes gone to bed. I want no no thinkin' of such a thing 'as I am right now. So, when all at once the old house began to pop an' shake, an' the dibles to rattle, I didn't know what to make of it. The old lady she ris out of the bed a-hollerin' to beat the band. 'It's the niggers a-risin', she said. I had been talked around before that that the niggers was gun-'er rise that night. I hadn't never paid no 'tention to it, but when the old lady begun to holler that they was a-risin', I thought she seed 'em through the window. Old Tom Maddox—he's dead now—shot all the window lights out of his house that night. Every time the house would shake and the windows rattle, he'd

blase away. He never did know no more an' the niggers was a-risin' up there from town an' 'hooped an' hollerin' till they knowed his voice an' let him in an' he told 'em what it was. There was others that thought it was the niggers. I thought the old lady seed 'em. But after while I peeped around about out at the window and then cracked the door open about two inches an' looked out. I couldn't see nobody, an' about that time the house give another shake, an' I knowed no mortal man could do that. I holler'd, 'It's a cyclone, an' with that we all piled out into the yard jes like we was. We never thought of clothes. I want a bit skeered; I jes knowed it was a cyclone. You know one had jes passed through here a year or two before that. The old lady spoke an' said: 'Why, Bill, it can't be a cyclone; there ain't no wind in it.' I hadn't thought of that."

"I disremember now whether the moon was shining that night or no. Anyhow, it wasn't so very dark. We stood around in the yard a little, not knowin' what to make of it. You could hear the people everywhere hollerin' an' takin' on. My folks was skeered to death nearly. The chillun they was a-squallin', an' the old lady a-prayin'."

"It wasn't long before the widder Morris and her chillun, that lives down the road below us a piece, come up. They didn't have no sense at all. The widder said it was rainin' blood; she could feel it on her hands."

"At that time my daddy was living over the hill about a quarter of a mile from me an' brother Sandy an' his chillun lived with him. So I seed the women an' chillun was skeered, an' I said, 'Le's go over to Pa's. There is a graveyard right plum' on top of the hill between where I lived then an' Pa's, an' the path led right around that graveyard. We hadn't more'n started good before uncle Tom's engine whistles begun to blow. They'd jes commenced ginning over there, an' thought they'd run awhile that night an' catch up with what cotton a-prayin', and some a-singin'. I knowed the devil was to pay some

way, but I didn't know how. The engine blowed, a new thought seemed to strike the widder Morris. She always was a fool—even when she was a child. The minutes she heard that whistle she began to holler. 'It's judgment day! It's judgment day! O Lordy! That's Gabriel's horn! He mercy, Lordy!'

"I thought it was a queer time of night for judgment day to be comin' the Bible speaks of judgment mornin'. Let she keep a-hollerin'. Then my old lady put in, 'O Lordy, the dead a-risin'! The dead a-risin'!'

"With that I looked up towards the graveyard, an' I was a son-of-a-gun of it didn't look to me like the whole poppulation was comin' up out of the ground. Right there among the tombstones, risin' up an' comin' our way like the very devil was after 'em, it looked to me like there was a hundred sperits. Some of them looked like they were ten feet high. They were all in white. Some was big an' some was little. I was dead certain all our departed friends and his wife fallin' over themselves to get to us they were so glad to see us. But we want' quite so keen to see them."

"Run! Great gas, we see."

"Right down the hill with that whole graveyard after us. The path wasn't big enough for us an' we took to the cotton patch. You ought to see that widder an' my old lady. With their night gowns flyin', jumpin' four rows of cotton at a time, an' me an' the chillun bringin' up the rear, the ghosts want' in that race at all."

"I knowed the women couldn't keep that pace long, an' sho-nuff, just thing I knowed the old lady fainted an' fell over. About that time the widder Morris hit a stump, an' she fell an' I stumbled over her. I don't know yet what got the chillun. I tried to git up but couldn't. I tried to crawl, an' I couldn't do that neither. All the sevment I'd ever done came to my mind."

"By that time the foremost sperit, an' the biggest one in the whole bunch, caught up with us. 'For Land's sake, Bill,' says he, 'what's the matter with you all; it's nobody but us!' an' I'll be draf of it want' brother Sandy an' his whole family in their night clothes, skeered dern nigh as bad as we was."

"How Tom Fooled the Old Boy. New England Magazine.

"There was a feller in the town where my mother came from whose name was Tom Cook. Tom was a pretty rough sort of a customer and he was in league with the devil, and he was, too. Well, by and by, the devil concluded he'd like Tom's company down below. So he called on Tom early one morning and found Tom had just got up and was dressing."

"Tom," said he, 'you've lived in this town long enough. I want you to come down to the pit and stay with me. So make haste, I've got to keep the fires goin' down there, you know.' Then the devil took Tom by the arm to hurry him and make sure of him. Tom didn't like the looks of the devil, and the devil's fingers were awful hot. Tom tried to pull along, and at the same time he said, 'Wait, wait, can't you, until I get my galuses on?'

"The devil looked him all over and then he grinned and he said: 'Yes, I'll wait till you get your galuses on.'"

"He no sooner said that than Tom threw the galuses into the fire. The devil saw he'd lost his men and went off in great anger, and Tom never wore galuses again."

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