

SOME LITERARY TITBITS

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WHEN the fat boy shouted through the keyhole to the Misses Charity and Mercy Pecksniff that Mrs. Todgers was dodging about among the stew with a fork, picking out the tender bits and eating them, he described accurately my method of extracting a great deal of pleasure and, I trust, some profit as well, from my reading. When one is young, one's appetite for books no less than for food is likely to be omnivorous. One devours everything one comes to, third-rate tales, verse masquerading as poetry, the pork scraps and election buns of the libraries with equal zest, all such things being welcome to the hearty but not nicely formed taste of twenty—not to mention sixteen; that is, provided one happens to read at all. A great many youngsters read nothing but school-books, which scarcely deserve to be called books. By the time one is twenty-five, one ought to be able to see some difference between the verse in the poet's corner of the *Morning Post* and Chaucer or Homer, even Pope's Homer. By that time one should be able to catch the tinny sound in *Marmion* and the *Lady of the Lake*, a sound quite inferior to the pure silvery tinkle of Burns's best work, the *Jolly Beggars* the *Brigs o' Ayr* and the finest of the songs. We will say nothing at present of the didactic, reflective poets: they are for a later period of life, when one has discovered the futility of nearly all action except that directed to some immediately useful end. The serene pleasures of reflection are for age, not youth. At twenty-five, if one is healthy, one is too busy seeing the surface of life to have time to analyse it.

As one's appetite for certain foods wanes as one grows older, so does one's literary taste change. Byron, a great poet to warm blooded sixteen, is nearly unreadable to pensively reflective thirty-eight, eyeing the first streak of gray above the temples, perhaps recalling that the noble author of *Childe Harold* never attained to that period of life. One of the best tests of the worth of a book that I know of is its power to satisfy the intelligent reader at all periods of life, from adolescence to old age. There are only a few books that seem likely to do this for me. Even a partial list would have to include several hackneyed titles, the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer, Vergil, Dante and Milton. Now I would have you observe, dear reader, that while one may enjoy these

great works at twelve, at twenty-four, at fifty and no doubt at seventy-five, to which patriarchal age I may never attain, one does not admire them in the same way at all periods of life. At the risk of setting some sophisticated critic's teeth on edge, I must admit that at fifteen I thought the battle in Heaven, in *Paradise Lost*, quite as fine as the description of Satan's journey through Chaos or the lovely lines on Eve's marriage bower. At the same age I really believed that *Titus Andronicus* was a finer play than *Hamlet*; *Titus* contained more blood, and the horrors were laid on with a whitewash brush. To-day I could not reread either of those early favourites without a painful effort. I still return nearly every year to the first four books of *Paradise Lost*, but beyond the end of the fourth I am not tempted to go. My experience with Dante was much the same as with Milton and Shakespeare. On my first reading of the great Tuscan, the devils seething the sinners in the boiling pitch of Malebolge gave me an almost physical shock of delight, like suddenly plunging into an onrushing wave. It was only when the clouds that gather round the setting sun began to take on a sober colouring for me, that I learned to enjoy the finest lines in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, to view with a poet's eye the trembling of the ocean stream, and to discover the ineffable joy concealed in the great phrase: "In His will is our peace". To say, as I caught a reviewer doing the other day, that this more mature appreciation of the spiritual and intellectual values of literature, as distinguished from what might be called the physical, does not represent a real advance in one's culture from the imperfect to the finer, in all respects higher, is to deny all intellectual evolution whatever, and to confess that we remain schoolboys till we drop into the grave. Schoolboys we should remain in our willingness to learn as long as life lasts. But surely there is some difference between the intellectual stock-in-trade of a first-form boy and the discrimination usually looked for in the upper sixth.

If I were asked to state briefly the real difference between my method of pursuing literary enjoyment to-day and that of thirty years ago, my answer would be that at fifteen I read, at fifty I reread; at fifteen I devoured whole books, poems and plays; at fifty I read parts of these things, which is what I mean by picking out the tender bits. Take a novel by Scott for instance, let us say, *Old Mortality*. I often read the meeting between Morton and Alison Wilson, and Morton's adventure with the Cameronians in the old farmhouse. There are writers with whom this method of picking out scenes will not work; Conrad is one who comes to mind. A Conrad book is all so much of a piece, so closely woven;

every part depends so much for its effect on every other part, that one must read the whole or nothing. But who ever found a Conrad book too long? In spite of his close analysis of character and the artistic unity of his stories, Hardy lends himself quite well to the selective process. What lover of the Wessex novels does not often return to such scenes as the dance at Tranter Dewy's, the visit of the choir to Mr. Maybold, the game between Wildeve and the reddleman on Egdon Heath, or Gabriel Oak tending his lambs under the spring stars? There are many favourite scenes which I reread again and again in Turgenev, Jane Austen, Loti, Balzac, France, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Galsworthy and Reymont, not to mention later writers like Walpole and Wodehouse.

In history I return most often to the purely descriptive scenes; the battle of Salamis, in Herodotus; the battles in the great harbour, in Thucydides; Livy's picture of Hannibal's army crossing the Alps; the discovery of the bones of the legions of Varus by the soldiers of Germanicus, in Tacitus; Froissart's Homeric account of Otterburne; the capture of St. Louis, in De Joinville; the storming of Constantinople, in Gibbon; Motley's glowing description of the relief of Leyden and Prescott's retreat of the Spaniards in the *Noche Triste*. There are quiet, reflective passages, too, to which I often return; Green's chapter on the rise of the English towns, the funeral oration of Pericles, Beard's fine chapter on Provincial America, and many others. Historical literature alone is so rich in good things that it would furnish the most diligent reader with ample material for a long lifetime.

Among the poets my picking for titbits may range in a single evening all the way from five lines of Homer; or Aeneas catching sight of Dido among the shades, to Chaucer's sparkling May morning; the scene in which Justice Shallow tells of old Double's death, an ode of Keats and a lyric by Herrick, Burns, Shelley, Emily Dickenson, Walter De La Mare, Yeats. The field is so wide and rich, the variety so endless that one may dodge about with the fork for ever and never spear the same bit twice within a year.

There are certain books which, for me, rank as literary titbits, to be taken whole. Other folk will have their own favourites, why not? We must not all try to like the same things. Among my tender morsels in this department are *Huckleberry Finn*, *Alice in Wonderland*, Fabre's *Life of a Caterpillar*, *The Wandering Scholars*, Browne's *Urn Burial*, the first part of the *Complete Angler*, *Crime of Sylvester Bonnard*, *Marius the Epicurean*. Again, *Persuasion*, a vol-

ume of Montaigne's essays and the essays of Lamb, Alice Meynell and Mary Webb, the *Golden Legend*, Jorn Uhl, Strachey's *River of Life*, White's *Selborne*, *Stray Leaves from a Physician's Notebook*, *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, *Jungle Peace* and several others, some well known to every lover of books, others known only to the literary epicure.

To discriminate, to learn the subtle difference between rose and rose, between Chateau Margaux or Hermitage No. 1 and a common wine; to master all the delicate nuances of form, colour, bouquet, all those little niceties of expression, those carved ivories of speech, that make a phrase, a sentence, a lyric, sometimes a whole book a thing to roll under the tongue, to taste, to extract endless enjoyment from, that surely is to be a civilized human being. One need not neglect the ordinary rough work of the world, abundant merciful services to one's fellow beings, and a healthy delight in the changing seasons, in all fair sights and sounds of earth, sky and sea, to grow adept in selecting the finest flowers of literature. To make that mistake is to become a mere bookman, a sort of animated volume. Rather does a deep, skilled nicely discriminating knowledge of all the best things in letters, philosophy, history and the kindred arts add force, quickness, accuracy to one's perception of the trend of current events, the noteworthy features of landscape and all the subtle shades of character in one's fellow human beings. That man ought to be the best citizen who has the richest, deepest understanding of life at all points and under all conditions. Good books being, as Milton says, the precious life blood of the master spirits of the world, will help one to understand the world, to enjoy it in moderation, to endure it, and above all to be useful in it.