

READY SET *Read*



A GUIDE TO *Reading* BETTER

Ready Set Read

Introduction

Why do we read books is one of those vast questions that need no answer? As well ask, why ought we to be good? or, why do we believe in a God? The whole universe of wisdom answers. To attempt an answer in a single article would be like turning a spyglass for a moment toward the stars.

We take the great simple things for granted, like the air we breathe. In a country that holds popular education to be the foundation of all its liberties and fortunes, we do not find many people who need to be argued into the belief that the reading of books is good for us; even people who do not read much acknowledge vaguely that they ought to read more.

There are, to be sure, men of rough worldly wisdom, even endowed with spiritual insight, who distrust "book learning" and fall back on the obvious truth that experience of life is the great teacher. Such persons are in a measure justified in their conviction by the number of unwise human beings who have read much but to no purpose. The book full blockhead, ignorantly read, With loads of learned lumber in his head is a living argument against mere reading?

But we can meet such argument by pointing out that the blockhead who cannot learn from books cannot learn much from life, either. That sometimes useful citizen whom it is fashionable to call a Philistine, and who calls himself a "practical man," often has under him a beginner fresh from the schools, who is glib and confident in repeating bookish theories, but is not yet skillful in applying them.

If the practical man is thoughtless, he sniffs at theory and points to his clumsy assistant as proof of the uselessness of what is to be got from books. If he is wise, the practical man realizes how much better off he would be, how much farther his hard work and experience might have carried him, if he had had the advantage of bookish training.

Moreover, the hard-headed skeptic, self-made and self-secure, who will not traffic with the literature that touches his life work, is seldom so confined to his own little shop that he will not, for recreation, take holiday tours into the literature of other men's lives and labors.

The man who does not like to read any books is, I am confident, seldom found, and at the risk of slandering a patriot, I will express the doubt whether he is a good citizen. Honest he may be, but certainly not wise. The human race for thousands of years has been writing its experiences, telling how it has met our everlasting problems, how it has struggled with darkness and rejoiced in light.

What fools we should be to try to live our lives without the guidance and inspiration of the generations that have gone before, without the joy, encouragement, and sympathy that the best imaginations of our generation are distilling into words. For literature is simply life selected and condensed into books. In a few hours we can follow all that is recorded of the life of Jesus—the best that He did in years of teaching and suffering all ours for a day of reading, and the more deeply ours for a lifetime of reading and meditation!

If the expression of life in words is strong and beautiful and true it outlives empires, like the oldest books of the Old Testament. If it is weak or trivial or untrue, it is forgotten like most of the “stories” in yesterday's newspaper, like most of the novels of last year. The expression of truth, the transmission of knowledge and emotions between man and man from generation to generation, these are the purposes of literature. Not to read books is like being shut up in a dungeon while life rushes by outside.

I happen to be writing in Christmas week, and I have read for the tenth time “A Christmas Carol,” by Dickens, that amazing allegory in which the hard, bitter facts of life are involved in a beautiful myth, that wizard's caldron in which humor bubbles and from which rise phantom figures of religion and poetry. Can anyone doubt that if this story were read by every man, woman, and child in the world, Christmas would be a happier time and the feelings of the race elevated and strengthened?

The story has power enough to defeat armies, to make revolutions in the faith of men, and turn the cold markets of the world into festival scenes of charity. If you know any mean person you may be sure that he has not read “A Christmas Carol,” or that he read it long ago and has forgotten it. I know there are persons who pretend that the sentimentality of Dickens destroys their interest in him.

I once took a course with an over-refined, imperfectly educated professor of literature, who advised me that in time I should outgrow my liking for Dickens. It was only his way of recommending to me a kind of fiction that I had not learned to like. In time I did learn

to like it, but I did not outgrow Dickens. A person who can read "A Christmas Carol" aloud to the end and keep his voice steady is, I suspect, not a safe person to trust with one's purse or one's honor.

It is not necessary to argue about the value of literature or even to define it. One way of bringing ourselves to realize vividly what literature can do for us is to enter the libraries of great men and see what books have done for the acknowledged leaders of our race. You will recall John Stuart Mill's experience in reading Wordsworth. Mill was a man of letters as well as a scientific economist and philosopher, and we expect to find that men of letters have been nourished on literature; reading must necessarily have been a large part of their professional preparation.

The examples of men of action who have been molded and inspired by books will perhaps be more helpful to remember; for most of us are not to be writers or to engage in purely intellectual work; our ambitions point to a thousand different careers in the world of action.

Lincoln was not primarily a man of letters, although he wrote noble prose on occasion, and the art of expression was important, perhaps indispensable, in his political success. He read deeply in the law and in books on public questions. For general literature he had little time, either during his early struggles or after his public life began, and his autobiographical memorandum contains the significant words: "Education defective." But these more significant words are found in a letter which he wrote to Hackett, the player: "Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read, while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are 'Lear,' 'Richard III,' 'Henry VIII,' 'Hamlet,' and, especially, 'Macbeth.'"

If he had not read these masterpieces, no doubt he would have become President just the same and guided the country through its terrible difficulties; but we may be fairly sure that the high philosophy by which he lifted the political differences of his day above partisan quarrels, the command of words which gives his letters and speeches literary permanence apart from their biographical interest, the poetic exaltation of the Gettysburg Address, these higher qualities of genius, beyond the endowment of any native wit, came to Lincoln in some part from the reading of books.

It is important to note that he followed Franklin's advice to read much but not too many books; the list of books mentioned in the biographical records of Lincoln is not long. But

he went over those half dozen plays “frequently.” We should remember, too, that he based his ideals upon the Bible and his style upon the King James Version. His writings abound in Biblical phrases.

We are accustomed to regard Lincoln as a thinker. His right arm in the saddest duty of his life, General Grant, was a man of deeds; as Lincoln said of him, he was a “copious worker and fighter, but a very meager writer and telegrapher.” In his “Memoirs,” Grant makes a modest confession about his reading:

“There is a fine library connected with the Academy [West Point] from which cadets can get books to read in their quarters. I devoted more time to these than to books relating to the course of studies. Much of the time, I am sorry to say, was devoted to novels, but not those of a trashy sort. I read all of Bulwer's then published, Cooper's, Marryat's, Scott's, Washington Irving's works, Lever's, and many others that I do not now remember.”

Grant was not a shining light in his school days, nor indeed in his life until the Civil War, and at first sight he is not a striking example of a great man influenced by books. Yet who can deny that the fruit of that early reading is to be found in his “Memoirs,” in which a man of action, unused to writing, and called upon to narrate great events, discovers an easy adequate style? There is a dangerous kind of conjecture in which many biographers indulge when they try to relate logically the scattered events of a man's life.

A conjectured relation is set down as a proved or unquestioned relation. I have said something about this in [Footnote: See John Macy's Guide to Reading, Chapter VIII.] writing on biography, and I do not wish to violate my own teachings. But we may, without harm, hazard the suggestion, which is only a suggestion, that some of the chivalry of Scott's heroes wove itself into Grant's instincts and inspired this businesslike, modern general, in the days when politeness has lost some of its flourish, to be the great gentleman he was at Appomattox when he quietly wrote into the terms of the surrender that the Confederate officers should keep their side arms.

Stevenson's account of the episode in his essay on “Gentlemen” is heightened, though not above the dignity of the facts, certainly not to a degree that is untrue to the facts, as they are to be read in Grant's simple narrative. Since I have agreed not to say “ought to

read," I will only express the hope that the quotation from Stevenson will lead you to the essay and to the volume that contains it.

"On the day of the capitulation, Lee wore his presentation sword; it was the first thing that Grant observed, and from that moment he had but one thought: how to avoid taking it. A man, who should perhaps have had the nature of an angel, but assuredly not the special virtues of a gentleman, might have received the sword, and no more words about it; he would have done well in a plain way.

One who wished to be a gentleman, and knew not how, might have received and returned it: he would have done infamously ill, he would have proved himself a cad; taking the stage for himself, leaving to his adversary confusion of countenance and the ungraceful posture of a man condemned to offer thanks. Grant without a word said, added to the terms this article: 'All officers to retain their side arms'; and the problem was solved and Lee kept his sword, and Grant went down to posterity, not perhaps a fine gentleman, but a great one."

Napoleon, who of all men of mighty deeds after Julius Caesar had the greatest intellect, was a tireless reader, and since he needed only four or five hours' sleep in twenty-four he found time to read in the midst of his prodigious activities. Nowadays those of us who are preparing to conquer the world are taught to strengthen ourselves for the task by getting plenty of sleep. Napoleon's devouring eyes read far into the night; when he was in the field his secretaries forwarded a stream of books to his headquarters; and if he was left without a new volume to begin, some underling had to bear his imperial displeasure.

No wonder that his brain contained so many ideas that, as the sharp-tongued poet, Heine, said, one of his lesser thoughts would keep all the scholars and professors in Germany busy all their lives making commentaries on it.

In Franklin's "Autobiography" we have an unusually clear statement of the debt of a man of affairs to literature: "From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' my first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes.... My father's little library consisted chiefly of books on polemic divinity, most of which I read, and have since often regretted that, at a time when I had such a thirst for knowledge, more proper books had not fallen in my way, since it was now resolved that

I should not be a clergyman. 'Plutarch's Lives' there was in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great advantage. There was also a book of De Foe's, called an 'Essay on Projects,' and another of Dr. Mather's, called 'Essays to do Good,' which perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life."

It is not surprising to find that the most versatile of versatile Americans read De Foe's "Essay on Projects," which contains practical suggestions on a score of subjects, from banking and insurance to national academics. In Cotton Mather's "Essays to do Good" is the germ perhaps of the sensible morality of Franklin's "Poor Richard." The story of how Franklin gave his nights to the study of Addison and by imitating the Spectator papers taught himself to write, is the best of lessons in self-cultivation in English.

The "Autobiography" is proof of how well he learned, not Addison's style, which was suited to Joseph Addison and not to Benjamin Franklin, but a clear, firm manner of writing. In Franklin's case we can see not only what he owed to books, but how one side of his fine, responsive mind was starved because, as he put it, more proper books did not fall in his way. The blind side of Franklin's great intellect was his lack of religious imagination. This defect may be accounted for by the forbidding nature of the religious books in his father's library. Repelled by the dull discourses, the young man missed the religious exaltation and poetic mysticism which the New England divines concealed in their polemic argument.

Franklin's liking for Bunyan and his confession that his father's discouragement kept him from being a poet "most probably," he says, "a very bad one"—show that he would have responded to the right kind of religious literature, and not have remained all his life such a complacent rationalist.

If it is clear that the purpose of reading is to put ourselves in communication with the best minds of our race, we need go no farther for a definition of "good reading." Whatever human beings have said well is literature, whether it be the Declaration of Independence or a love story. Reading consists in nothing more than in taking one of the volumes in which somebody has said something well, opening it on one's knee, and beginning.

We take it for granted, then, that we know why we read. We may ask one further question: How shall we read? One answer is that we should read with as much of

ourselves as a book warrants, with the part of ourselves that a book demands. Mrs. Browning says:

- We get no good.
- By being ungenerous, even to a book.
- And calculating profits—so much help.
- By so much reading. It is rather when.
- We gloriously forget ourselves, and plunge.
- Soul-forward, headlong, into a book's profound.
- Impassioned for its beauty, and salt of truth.
- 'Tis then we get the right good from a book.

We sometimes know exactly what we wish to get from a book, especially if it is a volume of information on a definite subject. But the great book is full of treasures that one does not deliberately seek, and which indeed one may miss altogether on the first journey through. It is almost nonsensical to say: Read Macaulay for clearness, Carlyle for power, Thackeray for ease. Literary excellence is not separated and bottled up in any such drug-shop array. If Macaulay is a master of clearness it is because he is much else besides.

Unless we read a man for all there is in him, we get very little; we meet, not a living human being, not a vital book, but something dead, dismembered, disorganized. We do not read Thackeray for ease; we read him for Thackeray and enjoy his ease by the way.

We must read a book for all there is in it or we shall get little or nothing. To be masters of books we must have learned to let books master us. This is true of books that we are required to read, such as text-books, and of those we read voluntarily and at leisure. The law of reading is to give a book its due and a little more. The art of reading is to know how to apply this law. For there is an art of reading, for each of us to learn for himself, a private way of making the acquaintance of books.

Macaulay, whose mind was never hurried or confused, learned to read very rapidly, to absorb a page at a glance. A distinguished professor, who has spent his life in the most minutely technical scholarship, surprised us one day by commending to his classes the fine art of “skipping.” Many good books, including some most meritorious “three-decker” novels, have their profitless pages, and it is useful to know by a kind of practiced instinct where to pause and reread and where to run lightly and rapidly over the page.

It is a useful accomplishment not only in the reading of fiction, but in the business of life, to the man of affairs who must get the gist of a mass of written matter, and to the student of any special subject.

Usually, of course, a book that is worth reading at all is worth reading carefully. Thoroughness of reading is the first thing to preach and to practice, and it is perhaps dangerous to suggest to a beginner that any book should be skimmed. The suggestion will serve its purpose if it indicates that there are ways to read, that practice in reading is like practice in anything else; the more one does, and the more intelligently one does it, the farther and more easily one can go. In the best reading—that is, the most thoughtful reading of the most thoughtful books—attention is necessary.

It is even necessary that we should read some works, some passages, so often and with such close application that we commit them to memory. It is said that the habit of learning pieces by heart is not so prevalent as it used to be. I hope that this is not so. What! have you no poems by heart, no great songs, no verses from the Bible, no speeches from Shakespeare? Then you have not begun to read, you have not learned how to read.

We have said enough, perhaps, of the theories of reading. The one lesson that seems most obvious is that we must come close to literature.

How To Get The Best Out Of Books

One is sometimes asked by young people panting after the waterbrooks of knowledge: "How shall I get the best out of books?" Here indeed, is one of those questions which can be answered only in general terms, with possible illustrations from one's own personal experience. Misgivings, too, as to one's fitness to answer it may well arise, as wistfully looking round one's own bookshelves, one asks oneself: "Have I myself got the best out of this wonderful world of books?" It is almost like asking oneself: "Have I got the best out of life?"

As we make the survey, it will surely happen that our eyes fall on many writers whom the stress of life, or spiritual indolence, has prevented us from using as all the while they have been eager to be used; friends we might have made yet never have made, neglected counsellors we would so often have done well to consult, guides that could have saved us many a wrong turning in the difficult way. There, in unvisited corners of our shelves, what neglected fountains of refreshments, gardens in which we have never walked, hills we have never climbed!

"Well," we say with a sigh, "a man cannot read everything; it is life that has interrupted our studies, and probably the fact is that we have accumulated more books than we really need." The young reader's appetite is largely in his eyes, and it is very natural for one who is born with a taste for books to gather them about him at first indiscriminately, on the hearsay recommendation of fame, before he really knows what his own individual tastes are, or are going to be, and in that wistful survey I have imagined, our eyes will fall, too, with some amusement, on not a few volumes to which we never have had any really personal relation, and which, whatever their distinction or their value for others, were never meant for us.

The way to do with such books is to hand them over to someone who has a use for them. On our shelves they are like so much good thrown away, invitations to entertainments for which we have no taste. In all vital libraries, such a process of progressive refection is continually going on, and to realize what we do not want in books, or cannot use, must, obviously, be a first principle in our getting the best out of them.

Yes, we read too many books, and too many that, as they do not really interest us, bring us neither benefit nor diversion. Even from the point of view of reading for pleasure, we

manage our reading badly. We listlessly allow ourselves to be bullied by publishers' advertisements into reading the latest fatuity in fiction, without, in one case out of twenty, finding any of that pleasure we are ostensibly seeking. Instead, indeed, we are bored and enervated, where we might have been refreshed, either by romance or laughter.

Such reading resembles the idle absorption of innocuous but interesting beverages, which cheer as little as they inebriate, and yet at the same time make frivolous demands on the digestive functions. No one but a publisher could call such reading "light."

Actually, it is weariness to the flesh and heaviness to the spirit.

If, therefore, our idea of the best in books is the recreation they can so well bring; if we go to books as to a playground to forget our cares and to blow off the cobwebs of business, let us make sure that we find what we seek. It is there, sure enough. The playgrounds of literature are indeed wide, and alive with bracing excitement, nor is there any limit to the variety of the games.

But let us be sure, when we set out to be amused, that we really are amused, that our humorists do really make us laugh, and that our story-tellers have stories to tell and know how to tell them. Beware of imitations, and, when in doubt, try Shakespeare, and Dumas—even Ouida. As a rule, avoid the "spring lists," or "summer reading." "Summer reading" is usually very hot work.

Hackneyed as it is, there is no better general advice on reading than Shakespeare's—
No profit is where is no pleasure taken, In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

Not only in regard to books whose purpose, frankly, is recreation, but also in regard to the graver uses of books, this counsel no less holds. No reading does us any good that is not a pleasure to us. Her paths are paths of pleasantness. Yet, of course, this does not mean that all profitable reading is easy reading.

Some of the books that give us the finest pleasure need the closest application for their enjoyment. There is always a certain spiritual and mental effort necessary to be made before we tackle the great books. One might compare it to the effort of getting up to see the sun rise. It is no little tug to leave one's warm bed—but once we are out in the crystalline morning air, wasn't it worth it? Perhaps our finest pleasure always demands

some such austerity of preparation. That is the secret of the truest epicureanism. Books like Dante's "Divine Comedy," or Plato's dialogues, will not give themselves to a lounging reader. They demand a braced, attentive spirit. But when the first effort has been made, how exhilarating are the altitudes in which we find ourselves; what a glow of pure joy is the reward which we are almost sure to win by our mental mountaineering.

But such books are not for moments when we are unwilling or unable to make that necessary effort. We cannot always be in the mood for the great books, and often we are too tired physically, or too low down on the depressed levels of daily life, even to lift our eyes toward the hills. To attempt the great books—or any books at all—in such moods and moments, is a mistake. We may thus contract a prejudice against some writer who, approached in more fortunate moments, would prove the very man we were looking for.

To know when to read is hardly less important than to know what to read. Of course, everyone must decide the matter for himself; but one general counsel may be ventured: Read only what you want to read, and only when you want to read it.

Some readers find the early morning, when they have all the world to themselves, their best time for reading, and, if you are a good sleeper, and do not find early rising more wearying than refreshing, there is certainly no other time of the day when the mind is so eagerly receptive, has so keen an edge of appetite, and absorbs a book in so fine an intoxication. For your true book-lover there is no other exhilaration so exquisite as that with which one reads an inspiring book in the solemn freshness of early morning.

One's nerves seem peculiarly strung for exquisite impressions in the first dewy hours of the day, there is a virginal sensitiveness and purity about all our senses, and the mere delight of the eye in the printed page is keener than at any other time. "The Muses love the morning, and that is a fit time for study," said Erasmus to his friend Christianus of Lubeck; and, certainly, if early rising agrees with one, there is no better time for getting the very best out of a book.

Moreover, morning reading has a way of casting a spell of peace over the whole day. It has a sweet, solemnizing effect on our thoughts—a sort of mental matins—and through the day's business it accompanies us as with hidden music.

There are others who prefer to do their reading at night, and I presume that most readers of this paper are so circumstanced as to have no time to spare for reading during the day. Personally, I think that one of the best places to read in is bed. Paradoxical as it may sound, one is not so apt to fall asleep over his book in bed as in the post-prandial armchair.

While one's body rests itself, one's mind, remains alert, and, when the time for sleep comes at last, it passes into unconsciousness, tranquilized and sweetened with thought and pleasantly weary with healthy exercise. One awakens, too, next morning, with, so to say, a very pleasant taste of meditation in the mouth.

Erasmus, again, has a counsel for the bedtime reader, expressed with much felicity. "A little before you sleep," he says, "read something that is exquisite, and worth remembering; and contemplate upon it till you fall asleep; and, when you awake in the morning, call yourself to an account for it."

In an old Atlantic Monthly, from which, if I remember aright, he never rescued it, Oliver Wendell Holmes has a delightful paper on the delights of reading in bed, entitled "Pillow-Soothing Authors."

Then, though I suppose we shall have the oculists against us, the cars are good places to read in—if you have the power of detachment, and are able to switch off your ears from another people's conversation. It is a good plan to have a book with you in all places and at all times. Most likely you will carry it many a day and never give it a single look, but, even so, a book in the hand is always a companionable reminder of that happier world of fancy, which, alas! most of us can only visit by playing truant from the real world.

As some men wear boutonnieres, so a reader carries a book, and sometimes, when he is feeling the need of beauty, or the solace of a friend, he opens it, and finds both. Probably he will count among the most fruitful moments of his reading the snatched glimpses of beauty and wisdom he has caught in the morning car. The covers of his book have often proved like some secret door, through which, surreptitiously opened, he has looked for a moment into his own particular fairy land. Never mind the oculist, therefore, but, whenever you feel like it, read in the car.

One or two technical considerations may be dealt with in this place. How to remember what one reads is one of them. Some people are blest with such good memories that

they never forget anything that they have once read. Literary history has recorded many miraculous memories. Still, it is quite possible to remember too much, and thus turn one's mind into a lumber-room of useless information.

A good reader forgets even more than he remembers. Probably we remember all that is really necessary for us, and, except in so far as our reading is technical and directed toward some exact science or, profession, accuracy of memory is not important. As the Sabbath was made for man, so books were made for the reader, and, when a reader has assimilated from any given book his own proper nourishment and pleasure, the rest of the book is so much oyster shell.

The end of true reading is the development of individuality. Like a certain water insect, the reader instinctively selects from the outspread world of books the building materials for the house of his soul. He chooses here and rejects there, and remembers or forgets according to the formative desire of his nature. Yet it often happens that he forgets much that he needs to remember, and thus the question of methodical aids to memory arises.

One's first thought, of course, is of the commonplace book. Well, have you ever kept one, or, to be more accurate, tried to keep one? Personally, I believe in the commonplace book so long as we don't expect too much from it. Its two dangers are (1) that one is apt to make far too many and too minute entries, and (2) that one is apt to leave all the remembering to the commonplace book, with a consequent relaxation of one's own attention.

On the other hand, the mere discipline of a commonplace book is a good thing, and if—as I think is the best way—we copy out the passages at full length, they are thus the more securely fixed in the memory. A commonplace book kept with moderation is really useful, and may be delightful. But the entries should be made at full length. Otherwise, the thing becomes a mere index, an index which encourages us to forget.

Another familiar way of assisting one's memory in reading is to mark one's own striking passages. This method is chiefly worthwhile for the sake of one's second and subsequent readings; though it all depends when one makes the markings—at what time of his life, I mean. Markings made at the age of twenty years are of little use at thirty—except negatively.

In fact, I have usually found that all I care to read again of a book read at twenty is just the passages I did not mark. This consideration, however, does not depreciate the value of one's comparatively contemporary markings. At the same time, marking, like indexing, is apt, unless guarded against, to relax the memory. One is apt to mark a passage in lieu of remembering it.

Still, for a second reading, as I say—a second reading not too long after the first—marking is a useful method, particularly if one regards his first reading of a book as a prospecting of the ground rather than a taking possession. One's first reading is a sort of flying visit; during which he notes the places he would like to visit again and really come to know. A brief index of one's markings at the end of a volume is a method of memory that commended itself to the booklovers of former days—to Leigh Hunt, for instance.

Yet none of these external methods, useful as they may prove, can compare with a habit of thorough attention. We read far too hurriedly, too much in the spirit of the “quick lunch.” No doubt we do so a great deal from the misleading idea that there is so very much to read. Actually, there is very little to read, if we wish for real reading— and there is time to read it all twice over.

We—Americans—bolt our books as we do our food, and so get far too little good out of them. We treat our mental digestions as brutally as we treat our stomachs. Meditation is the digestion of the mind, but we allow ourselves no time for meditation. We gorge our eyes with the printed page, but all too little of what we take in with our eyes ever reaches our minds or our spirits. We assimilate what we can from all this hurry of superfluous food, and the rest goes to waste, and, as a natural consequence, contributes only to the wear and tear of our mental organism.

Books should be real things. They were so once, when a man would give a fat field in exchange for a small manuscript; and they are no less real to-day—some of them. Each age contributes one or two real books to the eternal library—and always the old books remain, magic springs of healing and refreshment. If no one should write a book for a thousand years, there are quite enough books to keep us going.

Real books there are in plenty. Perhaps there are more real books than there are real readers. Books are the strong tincture of experience. They are to be taken carefully, drop by drop, not carelessly gulped down by the bottleful. Therefore, if you would get

the best out of books, spend a quarter of an hour in reading, and three-quarters of an hour in thinking over what you have read.

The Guide To Daily Reading

The elaborate, systematic “course of reading” is a bore. After thirty years spent among books and bookish people I have never yet met anyone who would admit that he had ploughed through such a course from beginning to end. Of course, a few faithful souls, with abundant leisure, have done this, just as there are men who have walked from New York City to San Francisco. Good exercise, doubtless! But most of us have not time for feats of such questionable utility.

Yet I myself and most of the booklovers whom I know have started at one time or another to pursue a course of reading, and we have never regretted our attempts. Why? Because this is an excellent way to discover the comparatively small number of authors who have a message that we need to hear. When such a one is discovered, one man with a good conscience let the systematic course go by the board until one has absorbed all that is useful from the store of good things offered by the valuable new acquaintance.

Each one has his idiosyncrasies. If I may be permitted to allude to a personal failing, let me confess that I have never read “Paradise Lost” or “Pilgrim's Progress.” I have hopefully dipped into them repeatedly, but—I don't like them. Someday I hope to, but until my mind is ready for these two great world-books, I do not intend to waste time by driving through them with set teeth. There are too many other good books that I do enjoy reading. “In brief, Sir, study what you most affect.”

The “Guide to Daily Readings” which follows makes no claim to be systematic. The aim has been simply to introduce the reader to a goodly company of authors—to provide a daily flower of thought for the buttonhole, to-day a glorious rose of poetic fancy, to-morrow a pert little pansy of quaint humor.

Yet nearly all the selections are doubly significant and interesting if read upon the days to which they are especially assigned. For example, on New Year's Day it is suggested that one set one's house in order by reading Franklin's “Rules of Conduct,” Longfellow's “Psalm of Life,” Bryant's “Thanatopsis,” and Lowell's “To the Future”; on January 19th, Poe's Birthday, one is directed to an excellent sketch of Poe and to typical examples of his best work, “The Raven” and “The Cask of Amontillado”; and on October 31st, Hallowe'en, one is reminded of Burns's “Tam O'Shanter” and Irving's “Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

The references are explicit in each case, so that it is a matter of only a few seconds to find each one. For example, the reference to the "Cask of Amontillado" is 4-Pt. I =67-77; which means that this tale is ten pages long and will be found in Part I of volume 4, at page 67. Excepting volumes 10-15 (Poetry), two volumes are bound in one in this set, so it should be remembered that generally there are two pages numbered 67 in each book.

The daily selections can in most cases be read in from fifteen minutes to half an hour, and Dr. Eliot, President Emeritus of Harvard, has said that fifteen minutes a day devoted to good literature will give every man the essentials of a liberal education. If time can be found between breakfast and the work-hours for these few minutes of reading, one will receive more benefit than if it is done during the somnolent period which follows the day's work and dinner. It is a mistake, however, to read before breakfast. Eyes and stomach are too closely related to permit of this.

Happy is he who can read these books in company with a sympathetic companion. His enjoyment of the treasure they contain will be doubled.

One final hint—when reading for something besides pastime, get in the habit of referring when necessary to dictionary, encyclopedia, and atlas. If on the subway or a railway train, jot down a memorandum of the query on the flyleaf, and look up the answer at the first opportunity.