

Turriff:
THE DEVERON PRESS
1916-2016
www.theveronpress.scot

What is the good of education?

Where ignorance is bliss, why seek to be wise?

Are the masses happy?

An Answer to Important Inquiries.

By the editor.

Syllables govern the world – Seldon

Reading maketh a full man – Bacon.

A Leeds teacher, in asking us to send him a copy of a catalogue of books, goes on, with delightful inconsistency, to say:-

There is a matter which troubles me at times, and to which I have not yet found a satisfactory answer. Perhaps you, with your wider knowledge and experience, can answer the riddle. I really should write what I mean in well-thought-out essay form, but I will try to make my point clear in this letter.

At times when I get a-thinking I wonder if one's study of art, science, and literature is a curse instead of a benefit. What does literature do for one? It makes for wider knowledge, enables one to see the follies and operations of the great mass, the iniquities of the men in power, the ignorance of the vast majority of workers and fellow-men. But what good does this feeling of superiority do us? Literature and teachers have existed for hundreds of year, and here we are, still struggling in the mire. If I can see all this, why don't my fellow-men see it, and strive for an alteration? The average man cares nothing for literature, and is apparently quite happy and content with a visit to a picture-house and a talk with his friends about football or horse-racing – in fact anything which does not matter. He, without reading or study, does not see the important things of life, but providing he has enough to eat and a roof over his head he is happy.

If I had not read I should be the same, and the problems of life would not trouble me, so why should I bother to study and read the so-called classics? Why not give all up, and, apart from the working hours, spend my time in being entertained by paid professionals in the music halls? If I want to read, well, there is a class of literature or reading matter which is light and exciting, but of no value reckoned from any fair standard of value, but it passes the time on.

Cui bono?

First a word as to the general question: we shall come our correspondent's specific points afterwards.

Cui bono? – what is the good? – is a very ancient question. The Romans asked it with respect to many matters widely differing from the topic broached by our correspondent. The subject of books and reading is discussed at some length in 'The Best of Friends' printed in *The Gateway* of Nov 1913 (No 17, Vol II), and what is said here must be comparatively offhand and merely supplementary.

I am bound to confess I have never had any of these misgivings or questionings, have never doubted the supreme value of books and reading. That a man should be able to sit down, and by looking at a series of outlines upon paper, be transported into another world – laughing, weeping, fiercely excited, or feverishly absorbed by the hour, insensible to heat and cold, impatient of interruption, regardless of the chances of making money, changing the settled conviction of years, differentiating himself from the non-reading ruck around him – seems to me the most wonderful of man's 'many inventions.'

The other night I lighted in to the household of a master tailor and found him telling stories to his eldest boy with some impatience. He could not understand why the boy, a bright lad, did not rather wish to read the stories for himself. I could not and cannot understand that either. To me the poorest print has a dignity that does not attach to the stateliest speech. I would always much rather read a play than see and hear it. The last time I saw 'Hamlet,' Forbes Robertson played the prince, and I came away, as always, disappointed. Sometimes he rollicked in the part, sometimes he stormed. But to me he was never Hamlet, but always Forbes Robertson, whereas when I *read* the tragedy, it is the veritable prince that speaks. There is no intrusion of an alien modern personality. Who is Forbes Robertson? What is any ordinary star actor but a patterer of words written by wiser men? I have seen many Hamlets but I know only one Prince of Denmark, and for him I have to go to the printed word of Shakespeare.

Reality and Print.

Reality is disappointing: print redresses the balance. The address which was marred by the personal defects of the orator has an effect when read next day that a mere speech to a mob of people could not command. Gladstone used to say 'constitootion'; Chamberlain could not get rid of the superfluous r's in such words as 'law' and 'idea,'

which he rendered as 'lor' and 'idear.' But of course none of this banality appeared in the reports. There all was so finished that the speaker was known as 'the Birmingham essayist.' A famous declaration of his – 'What I have said I have said' – was spoken at a hotel table between the puffs of his pipe – quite unimpressively.

Joseph Cowen, newspaper proprietor and wealthy merchant, a great Russophobe to whom no Russian refugee applied for succour in vain, was known to the initiated as a speaker of barbed and glancing periods; but he spoke with a thick Newcastle burr, and his puffy face and lank hair gave the lie to all that we read of the personal charm and magnetism of the great orator. It must have been unpleasant for a cultured person to listen to him; but you will find the volumes of his printed speeches on the tables of all knowing politicians who aim at effective platform work.

Places.

As it is with speakers, so it is with scenes. As a boy I knew an ex-soldier who had done sentry-go at 10 Downing Street. He was, when I knew him, a great slaughterer of cattle – was known in fact as Jamie Death. A silent man he was when sober; but I shall never forget the impression made on me when this butcher one night, in his cups, told me that Gladstone, coming down the steps, had said to him, 'Good morning, soldier!' The whole sense I had of 10 Downing Street was spoiled when I first saw that shabby little house itself.

A few years ago I travelled miles by rail and by road to see the farm of Ellisland, into which Burns took his newly-wedded wife Jean Armour. I knew that some of Robert's best poems were written there and that some of his happiest years were spent there. Allan Cunningham's father had said that in renting Ellisland Burns had made a poet's choice rather than a farmer's. This might fairly be taken to mean that Ellisland was a spot of great natural beauty. We found it so. The Nith flows close by the door as of old. 'Burns's Ballroom,' as a certain tower-like building is called, still rises sheer from the river. The path under the trees where Jean found Burns trudging up and down on the river's brink declaiming with tears of joy some of the just-composed lines of 'Tam o' Shanter,' is still very much what it must have been in the poet's day. Dalswinton Loch and the mansion-house of the Millers are still the lairds of Ellisland. John Grierson, the tenant of the farm, would have been a great favourite with Burns; for Grierson is a character. But the place, seen in its winter bareness especially, lost the pastoral and sylvan glamour that it had in the book. To see the little shell of Alloway Kirk, scene of the elaborately horrific phantasmagoria of 'Tam o' Shanter,' is to realise how much genius can make of the scantiest materials. The tiny church would hardly have held witches, coffins, piping Devil, and the rest of the awful paraphernalia, let alone affording room for the dance. And tramcars run to the place!

So it must be always. Life is confused: but literature sorts it out. People we meet and incidents that transpire are casual, irrelevant. But the historian, biographer, critic, playwright, novelist, select, co-ordinate, exclude the unessential. We are now living in specially notable times; but we cannot see the wood for the trees. Small men make

a big splash for the moment; but time will relegate them to their due level, and in history, and in history only, shall we see men and events in their proper perspective. Life is for time, but literature, the greatest of the arts, is for eternity.

The Strongest Plea.

The strongest plea for reading is that it is the only way of finding out remote and essential things. Calamitous mistakes are daily made because men did not read and do not know. The history of the world's failures and disasters is the story of its ignorances, superstitions, and duties neglected from sheer lack of certainty that the task had to be performed. Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these – I did not know. The German people, when they allowed the military Frankenstein to grow up and wax all powerful in their midst did not know that he would cost them and Europe so much; but the lesson was plain enough in history that he would control the army control the people and that aggression is the lifeblood of a military despotism. Had the advice of Lassalle and Bebel and old William Liebknecht been taken when it was tendered year after year long ago, not Armageddon but the Co-operative Commonwealth and the United States of Europe would have been the result. We have to read, not only in order to know, but that we may be trained to observe, to weigh evidence, and to estimate probabilities.

Why bother?

Why bother? Asks our correspondent. But it is no bother. The bother is, not to read, but to do without. There are railway journeys, periods of waiting, illnesses, spells of enforced idleness from one cause and another; and it would be pure punishment if one had to pass the time in vacancy.

'Light' Reading.

But why not read 'light' and 'exciting' literature in preference to 'the so-called classics'? he asks. Well, most people do. When the average person asks for a book it is usually a novel that is meant, and not even one of the best at that. But why 'so-called classics'? A heedless orator referred scornfully to 'the so-called nineteenth century.' If any book is called a classic we may be pretty sure it has earned the title. It has stood the test of time, a test that is more captiously applied to writings than to any other work of man's hands; for books are man's refuge and resort in his worst moods, and woe betide the poor author if he fail to soothe, amuse or stimulate. The books that have weathered the fads, megrims, finical fastidiousness, and sheer stupidity of generations of readers fully deserve the title of 'classics.'

If we are to talk of the 'so-called' we ought to apply the derogatory epithet to so-called 'light' literature. The first thing that strikes one about the so-called light literature is the extreme heaviness of it. It is full of people who do not matter figuring in incidents of no significance that never took place. The full, true, and particular account of how Ermytrude transferred her affections from her husband to her chauffeur – why should that be considered 'light' reading while Green's History or

Plutarch's Lives are set down as serious reading, and therefore, I suppose, heavy reading?

The Real Great and the Imaginary Small.

Why should anyone have more interest in Sam Weller than in Alfred the Great or his wise Premier, Archbishop Dunstan? Who wants to keep the company of imaginary inferior people when he might consort with real great men? During one of the darkest periods of my life I read through 'The Rise of the Dutch Republic,' and found solace and stimulus in the noble constancy of William the Silent and the gradual emergence of the Netherlanders as a nation from under the heel of a terrorising Spaniard. We get help in our small matters from the great men and the great occasions. I was then striving to save an old-established newspaper from the wreckers, and I did save it, and prolonged its life for thirteen years, till incompetence once more got hold of it. I did not know of any 'light' literature that could have helped me, or that would have been anything except impossibly dull at such a time.

What we remember.

Real people, and what they said and did on momentous occasions, are surely more memorable and interesting and every way more important than 'the clink of teaspoons and the accents of the curate.' The things we remember are not the saying and 'situations' in fiction, but the dramatic incidents of history – Scaevola putting his right hand in the altar fire, the quacking of the geese in the Capitol that betrayed the approach of the barbarians, Canute on the sea-beach, King Alfred and the cakes, Bruce and the spider, Bruce and de Bohun, the noble advice of the Miller of St Albans to his fellow rebels in the Peasant's Revolt, Catherine Douglas putting her white arm in the staple of the broken door-lock to withstand the murderers of her king, Joan of Arc's replies to the miserable tribunal that sought her peerless life; the single saying of Kirkpatrick and of old Bell-the-Cat, the many picturesque sayings of Cromwell ('Stop rolling that snowball' – a lie; 'Take away that bauble,' 'I beseech you gentlemen in the bowels of Christ, to believe it possible that you may be mistaken'); the characteristic declaration of George II – 'I see no good in bainting and boatry'; the vastly significant foreboding of the first Reform Bill, 'God forgive you this measure, I never can!' and the similar but more resigned speech of Robert Lowe at the passing of the second Reform Bill, 'We must now educate our masters.'

That we remember such incidents and sayings is the best proof that we are startled and entertained by them. If that be not 'lightness', I do not know the meaning of the word.

On the other hand, what do we remember of the so-called 'light' literature? Some time ago I read, for want of anything better to do, a fearful but wonderful story called 'The Gamblers,' by (I believe) William de Queux. I do not recall a single incident, or a single character of it. It was the most absolute melodrama, not on, but between, the

boards. This is the characteristic feature of 'light' reading – that one promptly forgets all about it, the memory becoming a complete *tabula rasa* six weeks after the event.

During many years I attended the theatre as a dramatic critic. Of 'Girls who took the wrong turning' of 'Worst Girls in London,' of 'Spans of Life' and 'Grips of Iron' I have witnessed scores; and from not one of them does one carry away a single definite recollection, whereas from the classics – novels or plays that have stood the attrition of the years – the least attentive have tags of wisdom and poetry for the everyday need, recollections of whimsy from Falstaff and Dogberry, of poignant pathos from Lear:

*Pray do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man.
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less,
And to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.*

You may read 'The Speckled Bird,' or 'The Blue Lagoon,' if you like. 'No profit comes where is no pleasure ta'en.' But I find the best good enough for me. It is no more merit to read what one likes than it was for Jack Horner to put in his thumb and pull out a plum. He said he was a good boy because he did what he wanted to do. That is where the humour of the rhyme lies. But if a man toils at the so-called classics when he would rather be reading Nat Gould's latest, it is not quite so droll. I do not read Nat Gould because I do not care for Nat Gould. I read Shakespeare because I care for Shakespeare. But if it does not take all sorts of people to make a world, there are certainly all sorts of people *in* the world. When one night not long ago I heard Olivia at the theatre ask her Uncle Toby, who is drunk as usual, 'How came you by this lethargy so early in the day?' the delicate humour of it made me laugh aloud, but I felt a little shamefaced when I found myself alone in the enjoyment of the joke. And yet why should I? A man ought to be glad that he finds something good where others find nothing at all. Which brings me to another question.

Are the Masses Happy?

Our correspondent seems to rather pity himself that the masses are happy in their sloppy reading, their talk about nothing, and their music halls, enjoyed while he 'bothers' with the so-called classics. Good Lord! The boot is so entirely on the other leg. Who can honestly say that the masses are happy? Are the lower animals happy? How can they be? Last night I looked out of the window of a railway carriage and found a waggon-load of beeves opposite. There they stood, packed head and tail,

standing in the cold and dark, jolted about with the lurches of the train, with probably little memory of the past, without comfort in body, with no resource of speech or song, with nothing to do but keep their feet and thole it out. We in the carriage had seats, light, company, speech, our pipes, and the freedom to get out at the next stopping-place if we cared to. Who has not seen pigeons humping themselves on the housetop by the hour, their heads in their feathers, looking, and we may be sure feeling, unutterably bored and without possibility of comfort or entertainment?

That is certainly how I see the great mass of mankind. They perform the same dull tasks day after day, with no entertainment save occasional grumbling and swearing. Their rudeness to other people and even to each other is to me the proof that they are miserable. Let no one mistake for happiness the howl of the hooligans at race or football match, or the mirthless skirl of the hoyden in the streets. Those who need to be in a crowd before they can laugh do but make-believe to be happy. But he that laughs in a solitude over a book enjoys himself to a surety. Watch a crowd at a fire or riot or the baiting of an unpopular speaker. The passions that build up without real provocation on those instances are the ebullitions of misery. The Scotsman baited in London or Dublin, the Jew baited everywhere, know in their deepest consciousness that the stupidest men take the largest share in the persecution; the measure of the stupidity is the measure of the spleen. Many working men beat their wives, and the more ignorant and miserable they are the greater is their cruelty.

The theory of Arcadian simplicity and accompanying good nature will not hold water. Kindness is a product of cultivation. Offer something to a poor man, and he will say 'What, for nothing!' Give a casually met out-of-work silver money, and he will exclaim in amazement 'Well, I'll go to hell!' The well-bred person does kindnesses, and he understands them when he receives in kind. If the well-bred man is not always a well-read man he has learned from those who are. If he 'has not been to school he has met the scholars.'

It is true that reading sensitises the student to the ills of life; but if it also enables him to help in the redress of those ills, the balance is more than adjusted, and he has done his duty, and pleased himself in addition. The plain way of wisdom is to reduce the pains and increase the lawful pleasures of life. It is not enough to be happy with cakes and ale. A pig is happy in its sty. Man has to fulfil the law of his being, and try to be happy in the best possible way. To the conscientious man who realises that the world is not to be bettered without effort the alternative to doing his duty is that he shall be miserable at the thought of opportunities neglected and of lions that have *not* been met in the path. Even then, there are consolations by the way, and one of these is the contemplation (in literature) of the great and glorious deeds of the illustrious dead who walked the way before us.

The struggle *does* avail. We are not quite so much 'in the mire' as we were in comparatively recent days. The war is a temporary set-back to many of our hopes;

but the war itself may well be the fruitful occasion of tremendous events in the direction of making democracy the real master in its own house.

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