FITCH GEORGE HAMLIN

COMFORT FOUND IN GOOD OLD BOOKS

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Содержание

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Introduction

These short essays on the best old books in the world were inspired by the sudden death of an only son, without whom I had not thought life worth living. To tide me over the first weeks of bitter grief I plunged into this work of reviewing the great books from the Bible to the works of the eighteenth century writers. The suggestion came from many readers who were impressed by the fact that in the darkest hour of sorrow my only comfort came from the habit of reading, which Gibbon declared he "would not exchange for the wealth of the Indies." If these essays induce any one to cultivate the reading habit, which has been so great a solace to me in time of trouble, then I shall feel fully repaid.

This book is not intended for those who have had literary training in high school or university. It was planned to meet the wants of that great American public which yearns for knowledge and culture, but does not know how to set about acquiring it. For this reason I have discussed the great books of the world from De Quincey's standpoint of the literature of power, as distinguished

from the literature of knowledge. By the literature of power the author of the Confessions of an English Opium Eater *meant books filled with that emotional quality which lifts the reader out of this prosaic world into that spiritual life, whose dwellers are forever young.*

No book has lived beyond the age of its author unless it were full of this spiritual force which endures through the centuries. The words of the Biblical writers, of Thomas à Kempis, Milton, Bunyan, Dante and others who are discussed in this book, are charged with a spiritual potency that moves the reader of today as they have moved countless generations in the past. Could one wish for a more splendid immortality than this, to serve as the stimulus to ambitious youth long after one's body has moldered in the dust?

Even the Sphinx is not so enduring as a great book, written in the heart's blood of a man or woman who has sounded the deeps of sorrow only to rise up full of courage and faith in human nature.

Comfort Found in Good Old Books

Nothing Soothes Grief Like Sterling Old Books – How the Sudden Death of an Only Son Proved the Value of the Reading Habit

For the thirty years that I have spoken weekly to many hundreds of readers of The Chronicle *through its book review columns, it has been my constant aim to preach the doctrine of the importance of cultivating the habit of reading good books, as the chief resource in time of trouble or sickness. This doctrine I enforced, because for many years reading has been my principal recreation, and I have proved its usefulness in broadening one's view of life and in storing up material from the world's greatest writers which can be recalled at will. But it never occurred to me that this habit would finally come to mean the only thing that makes life worth living. When one passes the age of forty he begins to build a certain scheme for the years to come. That scheme may involve many things – domestic life, money-getting, public office, charity, education. With me it included mainly literary work, in which I*

was deeply interested, and close companionship with an only son, a boy of such lovable personal qualities that he had endeared himself to me from his very childhood. Cut off as I have been from domestic life, without a home for over fifteen years, my relations with my son Harold were not those of the stern parent and the timid son. Rather it was the relation of elder brother and younger brother.

Hence, when only ten days ago this close and tender association of many years was broken by death – swift and wholly unexpected, as a bolt from cloudless skies – it seemed to me for a few hours as if the keystone of the arch of my life had fallen and everything lay heaped in ugly ruin. I had waited for him on that Friday afternoon until six o'clock. Friday is my day off, my one holiday in a week of hard work, when my son always dined with me and then accompanied me to the theater or other entertainment. When he did not appear at six o'clock in the evening I left a note saying I had gone to our usual restaurant. That dinner I ate alone. When I returned in an hour it was to be met with the news that Harold lay cold in death at the very time I wrote the note that his eyes would never see.

When the first shock had passed came the review of what was left of life to me. Most of the things which I had valued highly for the sake of my son now had little or no worth for me; but to take up again the old round of work, without the vivid, joyous presence of a companion dearer than life itself, one must have some great compensations; and the chief of these compensations lay in the

few feet of books in my library case – in those old favorites of all ages that can still beguile me, though my head is bowed in the dust with grief and my heart is as sore as an open wound touched by a careless hand.

For more than a dozen years in the school vacations and in my midsummer holidays my son and I were accustomed to take long tramps in the country. For five of these years the boy lived entirely in the country to gain health and strength. Both he and his older sister, Mary, narrowly escaped death by pneumonia in this city, so I transferred them to Angwin's, on Howell Mountain, an ideal place in a grove of pines – a ranch in the winter and a summer resort from May to November. There the air was soft with the balsam of pine, and the children throve wonderfully. Edwin Angwin was a second father to them both, and his wife was as fond as a real mother. For five years they remained on the mountain. Mary developed into an athletic girl, who became a fearless rider, an expert tennis player and a swimmer, who once swam two miles at Catalina Island on a foolish wager. She proved to be a happy, wholesome girl, an ideal daughter, but marriage took her from me and placed half the continent between us. Harold was still slight and fragile when he left the country, but his health was firmly established and he soon became a youth of exceptional strength and energy.

Many memories come to me now of visits paid to Angwin's in those five years. Coming home at three o'clock on winter mornings after a night of hard work and severe nervous strain, I would

snatch two or three hours' sleep, get up in the chill winter darkness and make the tedious five-hour journey from this city to the upper Napa Valley, in order to spend one day with my boy and his sister. The little fellow kept a record on a calendar of the dates of these prospective visits, and always had some dainty for me – some bird or game or choice fruit which he knew I relished.

Then came the preparatory school and college days, when the boy looked forward to his vacations and spent them with me in single-minded enjoyment that warmed my heart like old wine. By means of constant talks and much reading of good books I labored patiently to develop his mind, and at the same time to keep his tastes simple and unspoiled. In this manner he came to be a curious mixture of the shrewd man of the world and the joyous, care-free boy. In judgment and in mental grasp he was like a man of thirty before he was eighteen, yet at the same time he was the spontaneous, fun-loving boy, whose greatest charm lay in the fact that he was wholly unconscious of his many gifts. He drew love from all he met, and he gave out affection as unconsciously as a flower yields its perfume.

In college he tided scores of boys over financial straits; his room at Stanford University was open house for the waifs and strays who had no abiding-place. In fact, so generous was his hospitality that the manager of the college dormitory warned him one day in sarcastic vein that the renting of a room for a term did not include the privilege of taking in lodgers. His friends were of all classes. He never joined a Greek letter fraternity because he

did not like a certain clannishness that marked the members; but among Fraternity men as well as among Barbarians he counted his close associates by the score. He finished his college course amid trying circumstances, as he was called upon to voice the opinion of the great body of students in regard to an unjust ruling of the faculty that involved the suspension of many of the best students in college. And through arbitrary action of the college authorities his degree was withheld for six months, although he had passed all his examinations and had had no warnings of any condemnation of his independent and manly course as an editor of the student paper. Few boys of his age have ever shown more courage and tact than he exhibited during that trying time, when a single violent editorial from his pen would have resulted in the walking out of more than half the university students.

Then came his short business life, full of eager, enthusiastic work for the former college associate who had offered him a position on the Board of Fire Underwriters. Even in this role he did not work so much for himself as to "make good," and thus justify the confidence of the dear friend who stood sponsor for him. Among athletes of the Olympic Club he numbered many warm friends; hundreds of young men in professional and business life greeted him by the nickname of "Mike," which clung to him from his early freshman days at Stanford. The workers and the idlers, the studious and the joy-chasers, all gave him the welcome hand, for his smile and his gay speech were the password to all hearts. And yet so unspoiled was he that he would leave all the gayety and

excitement of club life to spend hours with me, taking keen zest in rallying me if depressed or in sharing my delight in a good play, a fine concert, a fierce boxing bout or a spirited field day. Our tastes were of wide range, for we enjoyed with equal relish Mascagni's "Cavalleria," led by the composer himself, or a championship prize-fight; Margaret Anglin's somber but appealing Antigone or a funny "stunt" at the Orpheum.

Harold's full young life was also strongly colored by his close newspaper associations. The newspaper life, like the theatrical, puts its stamp on those who love it, and Harold loved it as the child who has been cradled in the wings loves the stage and its folk. Ever since he wore knickerbockers he was a familiar figure in the The Chronicle *editorial rooms. He knew the work of all departments of the paper, and he was a keen critic of that work. He would have made a success in this field, but he felt the work was too exacting and the reward too small for the confinement, the isolation and the nervous strain. After the fire he rendered good service when competent men were scarce, and in the sporting columns his work was always valued, because he was an expert in many kinds of sports and he was always scrupulously fair and never lost his head in any excitement. The news of his death caused as deep sorrow in* The Chronicle *office as would the passing away of one of the oldest men on the force.*

Now that this perennial spirit of youth is gone out of my life, the beauty of it stands revealed more clearly. Gone forever are the dear, the fond-remembered holidays, when the long summer days

were far too short for the pleasure that we crowded into them. Gone are the winter walks in the teeth of the blustering ocean breezes, when we "took the wind into our pulses" and strode like Berserkers along the gray sand dunes, tasting the rarest spirit of life in the open air. Gone, clean gone, those happy days, leaving only the precious memory that wets my eyes that are not used to tears.

And so, in this roundabout way, I come back to my library shelves, to urge upon you who now are wrapped warm in domestic life and love to provide against the time when you may be cut off in a day from the companionship that makes life precious. Take heed and guard against the hour that may find you forlorn and unprotected against death's malignant hand. Cultivate the great worthies of literature, even if this means neglect of the latest magazine or of the newest sensational romance. Be content to confess ignorance of the ephemeral books that will be forgotten in a single half year, so that you may spend your leisure hours in genial converse with the great writers of all time. Dr. Eliot of Harvard recently aroused much discussion over his "five feet of books." Personally, I would willingly dispense with two-thirds of the books he regards as indispensable. But the vital thing is that you have your own favorites – books that are real and genuine, each one brimful of the inspiration of a great soul. Keep these books on a shelf convenient for use, and read them again and again until you have saturated your mind with their wisdom and their beauty. So may you come into the true Kingdom of Culture, whose gates

never swing open to the pedant or the bigot. So may you be armed against the worst blows that fate can deal you in this world.

Who turns in time of affliction to the magazines or to those books of clever short stories which so amuse us when the mind is at peace and all goes well? No literary skill can bind up the broken-hearted; no beauty of phrase satisfy the soul that is torn by grief. No, when our house is in mourning we turn to the Bible first – that fount of wisdom and comfort which never fails him who comes to it with clean hands and a contrite heart. It is the medicine of life. And after it come the great books written by those who have walked through the Valley of the Shadow, yet have come out sweet and wholesome, with words of wisdom and counsel for the afflicted. One book through which beats the great heart of a man who suffered yet grew strong under the lash of fate is worth more than a thousand books that teach no real lesson of life, that are as broken cisterns holding no water, when the soul is athirst and cries out for refreshment.

This personal, heart-to-heart talk with you, my patient readers of many years, is the first in which I have indulged since the great fire swept away all my precious books – the hoarded treasures of forty years. Against my will it has been forced from me, for I am like a sorely wounded animal and would fain nurse my pain alone. It is written in the first bitterness of a crushing sorrow; but it is also written in the spirit of hope and confidence – the spirit which I trust will strengthen me to spend time and effort in helping to make life easier for some poor boys in memory of the

one dearest boy who has gone before me into that "undiscovered country," where I hope some day to meet him, with the old bright smile on his face and the old firm grip of the hand that always meant love and tenderness and steadfast loyalty.

Among men of New England strain like myself it is easy to labor long hours, to endure nervous strain, to sacrifice comfort and ease for the sake of their dear ones; but men of Puritan strain, with natures as hard as the flinty granite of their hillsides, cannot tell their loved ones how dear they are to them, until Death lays his grim hand upon the shoulder of the beloved one and closes his ears forever to the words of passionate love that now come pouring in a flood from our trembling lips.

San Francisco, October 9, 1910.

TheGreatest Book inthe World

How to Secure the Best that is in the Bible – Much Comfort in Sorrow and Stimulus to Good Life may be Found in Its Study

Several readers of my tribute to my dead son Harold have asked me to specify, in a series of short articles, some of the great books that have proved so much comfort to me in my hours of heart-breaking sorrow. In this age of cheap printing devices we are in danger of being overwhelmed by a great tide of books that are not real books at all. Out of a hundred of the new publications that come monthly from our great publishing houses, beautifully printed and bound and often ornamented with artistic pictures, not more than ten will live longer than a year, and not more than a single volume will retain any life ten years from the time it first saw the light. Hence it behooves us to choose wisely, for our lives are limited to the Psalmist's span of years, and there is no hope of securing the length of days of Methuselah and his kindred.

Business or professional cares and social duties leave the average man or woman not over an hour a day that can be called one's very own; yet most of the self-appointed guides to reading – usually college professors or teachers or literary men with large

leisure – write as though three or four hours a day for reading was the rule, rather than the exception. In my own case it is not unusual for me to spend six hours a day in reading, but it would be folly to shut my eyes to the fact that I am abnormal, an exception to the general rule. Hence in talking about books and reading I am going to assume that an hour a day is the maximum at your disposal for reading books that are real literature.

And in this preliminary article I would like to enforce as strongly as words can express it my conviction that knowledge and culture should be set apart widely. In the reading that I shall recommend, culture of the mind and the heart comes first of all. This is more valuable than rubies, a great possession that glorifies life and opens our eyes to beauties in the human soul, as well as in nature, to all of which we were once blind and dumb. And culture can be built on the bare rudiments of education, at which pedagogues and pedants will sneer. Some of the most truly cultured men and women I have ever known have been self-educated; but their minds were opened to all good books by their passion for beauty in every form and their desire to improve their minds. Among the scores of letters that have come to me in my bereavement and that have helped to save me from bitterness, was one from a woman in a country town of California. After expressing her sympathy, greater than she could voice in words, she thanked me warmly for what I had said about the good old books. Then she told of her husband, the well-known captain of an army transport, who went to sea from the rugged Maine coast

when a lad of twelve, with only scanty education, and who, in all the years that followed on many seas, laboriously educated himself and read the best books.

In his cabin, she said, were well-worn copies of Shakespeare, Gibbon, Thackeray, Dickens, Burns, and others. These great worthies he had made a part of himself by constant reading. Of course, the man who thinks that the full flower of education is the ability to "parse" a sentence, or to express a commonplace thought in grandiloquent language that will force his reader to consult a dictionary for the meaning of unusual words – such a man and pedant would look upon this old sea captain as uneducated. But for real culture of mind and soul give me the man who has had many solitary hours for thought, with nothing but the stars to look down on him; who has felt the immensity of sea and sky, with no land and no sail to break the fearful circle set upon the face of the great deep.

In the quest for culture, in the desire to improve your mind by close association with the great writers of all literature, do not be discouraged because you may have had little school training. The schools and the universities have produced only a few of the immortal writers. The men who speak to you with the greatest force from the books into which they put their living souls have been mainly men of simple life. The splendid stimulus that they give to every reader of their books sprang from the education of hard experience and the culture of the soul. The writers of these books yearned to aid the weak and heavy-laden and to

bind up the wounds of the afflicted and sorely stricken. Can one imagine any fame so great or so enduring as the fame of him who wrote hundreds of years ago words that bring tears to one's eyes today – tears that give place to that passionate ardor for self-improvement, which is the beginning of all real culture?

And another point is to guard against losing the small bits of leisure scattered through the day. Don't take up a magazine or a newspaper when you have fifteen minutes or a half hour of leisure alone in your room. Keep a good book and make it a habit to read so many pages in the time that is your own. Cultivate rapid reading, with your mind intent on your book. You will find in a month that you have doubled your speed and that you have fixed in your mind what you have read, and thus made it a permanent possession. If you persist in this course, reading always as though you had only a few moments to spare and concentrating your mind on the page before you, you will find that reading becomes automatic and that you can easily read thirty pages where before ten pages seemed a hard task.

Long years ago it was my custom to reach home a half hour before dinner. To avoid irritability which usually assailed me when hungry, I took up Scott and read all the Waverley novels again. It required barely a year, but those half hours made at the end of the period eight whole days. In the same way in recent years I have reread Dickens, Thackeray, Kipling and Hardy, because I wanted to read something as recreation which I would not be forced to review. Constant practice in rapid reading has

given me the power of reading an ordinary novel and absorbing it thoroughly in four hours. This permits of no dawdling, but one enjoys reading far better when he does it at top speed.

Macaulay in his memoirs tells of the mass of reading which he did in India, always walking up and down his garden, because during such exercise his mind was more alert than when sitting at a desk.

Many will recall Longfellow's work on the translation of Dante's *Inferno*, done in the fifteen minutes every morning which was required for his chocolate to boil. Every one remembers the "Pigskin Library" which Colonel Roosevelt carried with him to Africa on his famous hunting trip. The books were all standard works of pocket size, bound in pigskin, which defies sweat, blood, dirt or moisture, and takes on in time the rich tint of a well-used saddle. Roosevelt read these books whenever he chanced to have a few minutes of leisure. And it seems to me the superior diction of his hunting articles, which was recognized by all literary critics, came directly from this constant reading of the best books, joined with the fact that he had ample leisure for thought and wrote his articles with his own hand. Dictation to a stenographer is an easy way of preparing "copy" for the printer, but it is responsible for the decadence of literary style among English and American authors.

In selecting the great books of the world place must be given first of all, above and beyond all, to the Bible. In the homely old King James' version, the spirit of the Hebrew prophets seems

reflected as in a mirror. For the Bible, if one were cast away on a lonely island, he would exchange all other books; from the Bible alone could such a castaway get comfort and help. It is the only book in the world that is new every morning: the only one that brings balm to wounded hearts.

Looked upon merely as literature, the Bible is the greatest book in the world; but he is dull and blind indeed who can study it and not see that it is more than a collection of supremely eloquent passages, written by many hands. It is surcharged with that deep religious spirit which marked the ancient Hebrews as a people set apart from alien races. Compare the Koran with the Bible and you will get a measure of the fathomless height this Book of books is raised above all others. Those who come to it with open minds and tender hearts, free from the worldliness that callouses so many fine natures, will find that in very truth it renews their strength; that it makes their spirit "mount up with wings as an eagle."

First read the Old Testament, with its splendid imagery, its noble promises of rewards to those who shall be lifted out of the waters of trouble and sorrow. Then read the New Testament, whose simplicity gains new force against this fine background of promise and fulfilment. If the verbiage of many books of the Old Testament repels you, then get a single volume like *The Soul of the Bible*, arranged by Ulysses Pierce and printed by the American Unitarian Association of Boston. This volume of 500 pages contains the real essence of the Bible, revealed in all the

beauty of incomparable phrase and sublime imagery; sounding the deeps of sorrow, mounting to the heights of joy; traversing the whole range of human life and showing that God is the only refuge for the sorely afflicted. How beautiful to the wounded heart the promise that always "underneath are the everlasting arms."

Read *The Soul of the Bible* carefully, and make it a part of your mental possessions. Then you will be ready to take up the real study of the Bible, which can never be finished, though your days may be long in the land. This study will take away the stony heart and will give you in return a heart of flesh, tender to the appeals of the sick and the sorrowing. If you have lost a dear child, the daily reading of the Bible will gird you up to go out and make life worth living for the orphan and the children of poverty and want, who so often are robbed from the cradle of their birthright of love and sunshine and opportunity for development of body and mind.

If you have lost father or mother, then it will make your sympathy keen for the halting step of age and the pathetic eyes, in which you see patient acceptance of the part of looker-on in life, the only role left to those who have been shouldered out of the active ways of the world to dream of the ardent love and the brave work of their youth. So the reading of the Bible will gradually transmute your spirit into something which the worst blows of fate can neither bend nor break. To guard your feet on the stony road of grief you will be "shod with iron and brass."

Then, in those immortal words of Zophar to Job:

> "Then shall thy life be clearer than the noonday;
> Though there be darkness, it shall be as the morning,
> And because there is hope, thou shalt be secure;
> Yea, thou shalt look about thee, and shalt take thy rest in safety;
> Thou shalt lie down, and none shall make thee afraid."

To this spiritual comfort will be added gain in culture through close and regular reading of the Bible. Happy are they who commit to the wax tablets of childish memory the great passages of the Old Testament. Such was Ruskin, who owed much of his splendid diction to early study of the Bible. Such also were Defoe and De Quincey, two men of widely different gifts, but with rare power of moving men's souls. The great passages of the Bible have entered into the common speech of the plain people of all lands; they have become part and parcel of our daily life. So should we go to the fountainhead of this unfailing source of inspiration and comfort and drink daily of its healing waters, which cleanse the heart and make it as the heart of a little child.

ShakespeareStands Next to theBible

Hints on the Reading of Shakespeare's Plays – How to Master the Best of These Dramas, the Finest of Modern Work

Next to the Bible in the list of great books of the world stands Shakespeare. No other work, ancient or modern, can challenge this; but, like the Bible, the great plays of Shakespeare are little read. Many of today prefer to read criticism about the dramatist rather than to get their ideas at first hand from his best works. Others spend much time on such nonsense as the Baconian theory – hours which they might devote to a close and loving study of the greatest plays the world has ever seen. Such a study would make the theory that the author of the *Essays* and the *Novum Organum* wrote *Hamlet* or *Othello* seem like midsummer madness. As well ask one to believe that Herbert Spencer wrote *Pippa Passes* or *The Idyls of the King*.

The peculiarity of Shakespeare's genius was that it reached far beyond his time; it makes him modern today, when the best work of his contemporaries, like Ben Jonson, Marlowe and Ford, are unreadable. Any theatrical manager of our time who should have the hardihood to put on the stage Jonson's *The Silent Woman* or

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* would court disaster. Yet any good actor can win success with Shakespeare's plays, although he may not coin as much money as he would from a screaming farce or a homespun play of American country life.

Those who have heard Robert Mantell in Lear, Richard III, Hamlet or Iago can form some idea of the vitality and the essential modernism of Shakespeare's work. The good actor or the good stage manager cuts out the coarse and the stupid lines that may be found in all Shakespeare's plays. The remainder reaches a height of poetic beauty, keen insight into human nature and dramatic perfection which no modern work even approaches. Take an unlettered spectator who may never have heard Shakespeare's name and he soon becomes thrall to the genius of this great Elizabethan wizard, whose master hand reaches across the centuries and moves him to laughter and tears. The only modern who can claim a place beside him is Goethe, whose *Faust*, whether in play or in opera, has the same deathless grip on the sympathies of an audience.

And yet in taking up Shakespeare the reader who has no guide is apt to stumble at the threshold and retire without satisfaction. As arranged, the comedies are given first, and it is not well to begin with Shakespeare's comedies. In reading any author it is the part of wisdom to begin with his best works. Our knowledge of Shakespeare is terribly meager, but we know that he went up to London from his boyhood home at Stratford-on-Avon, that he secured work in a playhouse, and that very soon he began to write

plays. To many this sudden development of a raw country boy into a successful dramatist seems incredible.

Yet a similar instance is afforded by Alexander Dumas, the greatest imaginative writer of his time, and the finest story-teller in all French literature. Dumas had little education, and his work, when he went to Paris from his native province, was purely clerical, yet he read very widely, and the novels and romances of Scott aroused his imagination. But who taught Dumas the perfect use of French verse? Who gave him his prose style as limpid and flowing as a country brook? These things Dumas doesn't think it necessary to explain in his voluminous memoirs. They are simply a part of that literary genius which is the despair of the writer who has not the gift of style or the power to move his readers by creative imagination.

In the same way, had Shakespeare left any biographical notes, we should see that this raw Stratford youth unconsciously acquired every bit of culture that came in his way; that his mind absorbed like a sponge all the learning and the literary art of his famous contemporaries. The Elizabethan age was charged with a peculiar imaginative power; the verse written then surpasses in uniform strength and beauty any verse that has been written since; the men who wrote were as lawless, as daring, as superbly conscious of their own powers as the great explorers and adventurers who carried the British flag to the ends of the earth and made the English sailor feared as one whose high courage and bulldog tenacity never recognized defeat.

Given creative literary genius in greater measure than any other man was ever endowed with, the limits of Shakespeare's development could not be marked. His capacity was boundless and, living in an atmosphere as favorable to literary art as that of Athens in the time of Pericles, Shakespeare produced in a few years those immortal plays which have never been equaled in mastery of human emotion and beauty and power of diction.

There is no guide to the order in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, except the internal evidence of his verse. Certain habits of metrical work, as shown in the meter and the arrangement of the lines, have enabled close students of Shakespeare to place most of the comedies after the historical plays. Thus in the early plays Shakespeare arranged his blank verse so that the sense ends with each line and he was much given to rhymed couplets at the close of each long speech. But later, when he had gained greater mastery of his favorite blank verse, many lines are carried over, thus welding them more closely and forming verse that has the rhythm and beauty of organ tones. As Shakespeare advanced in command over the difficult blank verse he showed less desire to use rhyme.

This close study of versification shows that *Love's Labor's Lost* was probably Shakespeare's first play, followed by *The Comedy of Errors* and by several historical plays. One year after his first rollicking comedy appeared he produced *Romeo and Juliet*, but this great drama of young love was revised carefully six years later and put into the form that we know. Three years after his

start he produced *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and followed these with his greatest comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, the latter the comedy which appeals most strongly to modern readers and modern audiences.

Then came a period in which Shakespeare's world was somber, and his creative genius found expression in the great tragedies —*Julius Cæsar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. And finally we have the closing years of production, in which he wrote three fine plays —*The Tempest*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*.

According to the best authorities, Shakespeare began writing plays in 1590 and he ended early in 1613. Into these twenty-three years he crowded greater intellectual activity than any other man ever showed in the same space of time. Probably Sir Walter Scott, laboring like a galley slave at the oar to pay off the huge debt rolled up by the reckless Ballantyne, comes next in creative literary power to Shakespeare; but Scott's work was in prose and was far easier of production.

Shakespeare, like all writers of his day, took his materials from all sources and never scrupled to borrow plots from old or contemporary authors. But he so transmuted his materials by the alchemy of genius that one would never recognize the originals from his finished version. And he put into his great plays such a wealth of material drawn from real life that one goes to them for comfort and sympathy in affliction as he goes to the great books

of the Bible. In a single play, as in *Hamlet*, the whole round of human life and passions is reviewed. Whatever may be his woe or his disappointment, no one goes to *Hamlet* without getting some response to his grief or his despair.

To give a list of the plays of Shakespeare which one should read is very difficult, because one reader prefers this and another that, and each can give good reasons for his liking. What I shall try to do here is to indicate certain plays which, if carefully read several times, will make you master of Shakespeare's art and will prepare you for wider reading in this great storehouse of human nature. *Romeo and Juliet*, a tragedy of young, impulsive love, represents the fine flower of Shakespeare's young imagination, before it had been clouded by sorrow. The verse betrays some of the defects of his early style, but it is rich in beauty and passion. The plot is one of the best, and this, with the opportunity for striking stage effects and brilliant costumes, has made it the most popular of all Shakespeare's plays. The characters are all sharply drawn and the swift unfolding of the plot represents the height of dramatic skill. Next to this, one should read *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is one of the great characters in Shakespeare's gallery, a pathetic, lonely figure, barred out from all close association with his fellows in trade by evil traits, that finally drive him to ruin. Then take up a comedy like *As You Like It*, as restful to the senses as fine music, and filled with verse as tuneful and as varied as the singing of a great artist.

By this reading you will be prepared for the supreme tragedies

– each a masterpiece without a superior in any literature. These are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Julius Cæsar*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In no other six works in any language can one find such range of thought, such splendor of verse, such soundings of the great sea of human passions – love, jealousy, ambition, hate, remorse, fear and shame. Each typifies some overmastering passion, but *Hamlet* stands above all as a study of a splendid mind, swayed by every wind of impulse, noble in defeat and pathetic in the final ruin of hope and love, largely due to lack of courage and decision of character. Take it all in all, *Hamlet* represents the finest creative work of any modern author. This play is packed with bitter experience of life, cast in verse that is immortal in its beauty and melody.

Macbeth represents ambition, linked with superstition and weakness of will; the fruit is an evil brood – remorse struggles with desire for power, affection is torn by the malign influence of guilt, as seen in the unhinging of Lady Macbeth's mind. No one should miss the opportunity to see a great actor or a great actress in *Macbeth*– it is a revelation of the deeps of human tragedy. *King Lear* is the tragedy of old age, the same tragedy that Balzac drew in *Le Pere Goriot*, save that Lear becomes bitter, and after weathering the storm of madness, wreaks vengeance on his unnatural daughters. Old Goriot, one of the most pathetic figures in all fiction, goes to his grave trying to convince the world that his heartless girls really love him.

The real hero of *Julius Cæsar* is Brutus, done to death by

men of lesser mold and coarser natures, who take advantage of his lack of practical sense and knowledge of human nature. This play is seldom put on the stage in recent years, but it is always a treat to follow it when depicted by good actors. *Othello* is the tragedy of jealousy working upon the mind of a simple and noble nature, which is quick to accept the evil hints of Iago because of its very lack of knowledge of women. Iago is the greatest type of pure villainy in all literature, far more vicious than Goethe's Mephistopheles, because he wreaks his power over others largely from a satanic delight in showing his skill and resources in evil. As a play *Othello* is the most perfectly constructed of Shakespeare's works. Finally in *Antony and Cleopatra* Shakespeare shows the disintegrating force of guilty love, which does not revolt even when the Egyptian Queen ruins her lover's cause by unspeakable cowardice. Cleopatra is the great siren of literature, and the picture of her charms is fine verse.

And here let me advise the hearing of good actors in Shakespeare as a means of culture. All the great Shakespearean actors are gone, but Mantell remains, and he, though not equal to Booth, is, to my mind, far more convincing than Irving. Mantell's Lear is the essence of great acting – something to recall with rare pleasure. Edwin Booth I probably saw in *Hamlet* a score of times in twice that many years, but never did I see him without getting some new light on the melancholy Dane. Even on successive nights Booth was never just the same, as his mood tinged his

acting. His sonorous voice, his perfect enunciation, his graceful gestures, above all his striking face, alive with the light of genius – these are memories it is a delight to recall.

To develop appreciation of Shakespeare I would advise reading the plays aloud. In no other way will you be able to savor the beauty and the melody of the blank verse. It was my good fortune while an undergraduate at Cornell University to be associated for four years with Professor Hiram Corson, then head of the department of English literature. Corson believed in arousing interest in Shakespeare by reading extracts from the best plays, with running comment on the passages that best illustrated the poet's command of all the resources of blank verse. His voice was like a fine organ, wonderfully developed to express every emotion, and I can recall after nearly forty years as though it were but yesterday the thrilling effect of these readings. No actor on the stage, with the single exception of Edwin Booth, equaled Corson in beauty of voice or in power of expression.

The result of these readings, with the comment that came from a mind stored with Shakespearean lore, was to stir one's ambition to study the great plays. Recalling the liberal education that came from Corson's readings, I have been deeply sorry for college students whom I have seen vainly trying to appreciate Shakespeare's verse as read by professors with harsh, rasping, monotonous voices that killed the beauty of rhyme and meter as a frost kills a fine magnolia blossom breathing perfume over a garden. When will college presidents awake to the fact that book

learning alone cannot make a successful professor of English literature, when the man is unable to bring out the melody of the verse? Similar folly is shown by the theological schools that continue to inflict upon the world preachers whose faulty elocution makes a mock of the finest passages of the Bible.

In my own case my tireless study of Shakespeare during four years at college, which included careful courses of reading and study during the long vacations, so saturated my mind with the great plays that they have been ever since one of my most cherished possessions. After years of hard newspaper work it is still possible for me to get keen pleasure from reading aloud to myself any of Shakespeare's plays. My early study of Shakespeare led me to look up every unfamiliar word, every phrase that was not clear. This used to be heavy labor, but now all the school and college editions are equipped with these aids to the student. The edition of Shakespeare which always appealed to me most strongly was the Temple edition, edited by Israel Gollancz. It is pocket size, beautifully printed and very well edited. For a companion on a solitary walk in city or country no book is superior to one of Shakespeare's plays in this convenient Temple edition, bound in limp leather.

The best edition of Shakespeare in one volume is, to my mind, the Cambridge edition, issued by the Houghton Mifflin Company of Boston, uniform with the same edition of other English and American poets. This, of course, has only a few textual notes, but it has a good glossary of unusual and obsolete

words. It makes a royal octavo volume of one thousand and thirty-six double-column pages, clearly printed in nonpareil type.

In this chapter I have been able only to touch on the salient features of the work of the foremost English poet and dramatist, and, in my judgment, the greatest writer the world has ever seen. If these words of mine stimulate any young reader to take up the study of Shakespeare I shall feel well repaid. Certainly, with the single exception of the Bible, no book will reward a careful, loving study so well as Shakespeare.

How toRead the AncientClassics

Authors of Greece and Rome One Should Know – Masterpieces of the Ancient World that may be Enjoyed in Good English Versions

In choosing the great books of the world, after the Bible and Shakespeare, one is brought face to face with a perplexing problem. It is easy to provide a list for the scholar, the literary man, the scientist, the philosopher; but it is extremely difficult to arrange any list for the general reader, who may not have had the advantage of a college education or any special literary training. And here, at the outset, enters the problem of the Greek, Latin and other ancient classics which have always been widely read and which you will find quoted by most writers, especially those of a half century ago. In this country literary fads have prevailed for a decade or two, only to be dropped for new fashions in culture.

Take Emerson, for instance. His early development was strongly affected by German philosophy, which was labeled Transcendentalism. A. Bronson Alcott, who never wrote anything that has survived, was largely instrumental in infecting Emerson with his own passion for the dreamy German

philosophical school. Emerson also was keenly alive to the beauties of the Greek and the Persian poets, although he was so broad-minded in regard to reading books in good translations that he once said he would as soon think of swimming across the Charles river instead of taking the bridge, as of reading any great masterpiece in the original when he could get a good translation.

Many of Emerson's essays are an ingenious mosaic of Greek, Latin, Persian, Hindoo and Arabic quotations. These extracts are always apt and they always point some shrewd observation or conclusion of the Sage of Concord; but that Emerson should quote them as a novelty reveals the provincial character of New England culture in his day as strongly as the lectures of Margaret Fuller.

The question that always arises in my mind when reading a new list of the hundred or the fifty best books by some recognized literary authority is: Does the ordinary business or professional man, who has had no special literary training, take any keen interest in the great masterpieces of the Greeks and Romans? Does it not require some special aptitude or some special preparation for one to appreciate Plato's *Dialogues* or Sophocles' *Œdipus*, Homer's *Iliad* or Horace's *Odes*, even in the best translations? In most cases, I think the reading of the Greek and Latin classics in translations is barren of any good results. Unless one has a passionate sympathy with Greek or Roman life, it is impossible, without a study of the languages and an intimate knowledge of the life and ideals of the people,

to get any grasp of their best literary work. The things which the scholar admires seem to the great public flat and commonplace; the divine simplicity, the lack of everything modern, seems to narrow the intellectual horizon. This, I think, is the general result.

But over against this must be placed the exceptions among men of literary genius like Keats and Richard Jefferies, both Englishmen of scanty school education, who rank, to my mind, among the greatest interpreters of the real spirit of the classical age. Keats, like Shakespeare, knew "small Latin and less Greek"; yet in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and his *Endymion* he has succeeded in bringing over into the alien English tongue the very essence of Greek life and thought. Matthew Arnold, with all his scholarship and culture, never succeeded in doing this, even in such fine work as *A Strayed Reveler* or *Empedocles on Etna*. In the same way Jefferies, who is neglected by readers of today, in *The Story of My Heart*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.