

WHEN AND WHAT TO READ



THE MOOD OF THE MOMENT SHOULD PLAY A GREAT PART IN OUR CHOICE OF BOOKS

*Books cannot always please, however good;
Minds are not ever craving for their food.*

SO wrote George Crabbe, a poet out of fashion, but a man of plain and simple truisms and a lover of books withal. There are moods for reading, and they vary with men, and are almost always unaccountable. Nathaniel Hawthorne finds his joy in the lumber room of the Old Manse; Hazlitt never delights more in a book than when he settles for a few hours at a wayside inn; Leigh Hunt must have his crowded library; Lamb will snatch pleasure at a bookstall; Stevenson will revel in a single volume as he tramps along the road. It is all a question of temperament and mood, and the wherefore remains a mystery.

How comes it that one day we can wrestle with a metaphysician, and another day be only fit to trifle with a poetaster? How is it that we are seized with the desire to read, and read with avidity, a book that has lain unopened on our shelves for years, and that nothing will satisfy us until we have brushed away the dust and cobwebs, and, as Johnson would say, "torn the heart from it," wondering all the while at our long neglect? As rules are lacking, and explanations are vain, all we can do is to go to the booklovers themselves, ascertain what they did and what they said, and, on this evidence, reach some sort of a conclusion.

What the Bookmen Say

"HOW the mood for a book sometimes rushes upon one, either one knows not why, or in consequence, perhaps, of some most trifling suggestion," wrote George Gissing in the "Rycroft Papers." And he went on to illustrate by examples. He came to an old farmhouse, saw the doctor's gig, watched the lights twinkling at an upper window—and rushed home to read "Tristram Shandy" once more.

Isaac Disraeli commented on Bacon's advice to pursue our studies in whatever disposition the mind may be as "excellent." The argument is certainly good. "If happily disposed we shall gain a great step; and if indisposed we shall work out the knots and strands of the mind, and make the middle times the more pleasant." Yet this is a rule for the bibliophile rather than for the average reader, for the worker at books and not for the mere enjoyer of them. "If indisposed," the ordinary man had better leave them alone, and not force himself to toil over them. The real good is only derived when the mind is ready and willing. Equally, I must say, read no book because you "ought," unless it be a set task for a specific purpose; beware also of the book that all men praise for a season, and declare "you must read it," and then—well, we know the fate of most of that class!

It is best that a man should find his own favourites and be faithful to them; and, given the leisure, he will ever be "in the mood" to let them entertain him.

It was in such contemplative mood that Alexander Smith wrote his essay on the favourite books lined up on a shelf in his library, spending a rainy day in looking over his treasures and in analysing the qualities that attracted him. The mood lasted from morning, "when the wind was bending the trees and the rain came against the window in quick petulant dashes," until "the early light of wintry sunset was falling across the paper," and as he ended his review he knew that the mood might not be recaptured—"when I wake to-morrow, the world will be changed." But what a time it had been!—when he had revelled in Milton's poems "to be read only on high days and festivals of the spirit"; Hawthorne's Tales, with their delicacy, their mystery, and their wistful humour; Aytoun's ballads and Luther's hymns; Boswell's Johnson; Elliott's Corn Law rhymes; what a medley and what a banquet; Only a man in the perfect mood for reading could have enjoyed it.

"When I am not walking, I am reading," said Lamb. And he proceeds to tell us what are the books for special occasions. But his taste was so catholic he could "read almost anything," yet place and time must be appropriate.

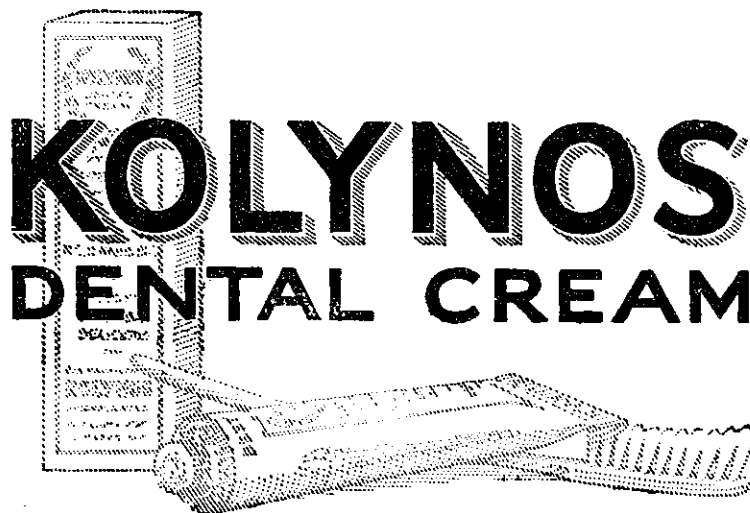
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