

Reading for Amusement.

BY G. A. WALKER.

According to the reports of the public libraries, most of the books taken from them are novels. The per centage of works of sterling quality—books of science, ethics and even biography—drawn from these popular institutions is very low indeed. It is true that the public libraries are designed to provide reading for the people at large, while in most cities there are libraries provided for the use of scholars. The Athenæum, in Boston, is an aristocratic institution designed for the use of the cultivated and literary classes. The Astor Library, in New York City, is the resort of students and specialists, and the books most called for in institutions of this kind are of a sufficiently substantial character to satisfy the most exacting. Still it is unquestionably true, that most of our people read for entertainment and not for improvement; and those who read works of a serious character do so to fill the vacancies of idleness with diversification rather than for serious ends.

But I am not sure this is an evil to be deplored nor a vice to be condemned. Reading is a form of amusement, and a vastly wholesomer and more elevating pastime than many popular recreations. It is the only amusement thousands of people can indulge in. The novel is the chief pleasurable resource of thousands who have no gay and joyous society, no brilliant and fascinating entertainments, no exhilarating excursions into the country nor indulgence of musical and artistic tastes, no admission to the favored company of the great. The novel creates an ideal world for their enjoyment, introduces them to the society of kings and nobles, and surrounds them for the time with an atmosphere of poetry and enchantment. It stimulates the feelings through the imagination, and sometimes excites the faculties as wine. To the poor, overwrought and unfortunate, the sick and the solitary, the value of this source of ideal enrichment and exhilaration cannot be estimated, and its moral importance in preventing dangerous dissipations has been overlooked by most ethical writers and exhorters. The more reading the less rioting. Romance is vastly better than rum. Story reading is a marked advance on idle gossip and scandal-mongering. The shop girl or the servant girl who finds relief for weariness and a retreat from bad conditions in the splendid picturings of fiction, till she forgets her lot in the play of passions and fancies her real life furnishes no scope for, is vastly better off than her sister who has no taste for reading and is too

often drawn into questionable excitements and companionships. The mechanic who finds delight in the pages of Dickens and Shakespeare is not likely to lose himself in the dissipations of the gaming table or saloon. And often those who begin reading for mere entertainment continue for serious ends. The taste it cultivates is refining. The habit it forms is improving and insensibly awakens a love of knowledge. Flower gathering often leads to a study of botany. The chase after butterflies frequently ends in zoology. Waverly and Bulwer are introductions to history, and George Eliot invites her readers to science, philosophy and ethics.

The moral value of recreation is only half suspected by too many of our religious teachers. Dr. E. H. Clark says that when a circus company applied for a license a second time it was opposed by only two classes, the clergy and the rum sellers. The former objected to it for its supposed immoral tendencies; the latter opposed it because it drew customers from their bar. It was a rival entertainment, and emptied their saloons. Reading, as a mere amusement, has the same effect. Nor is it, as some persons seem to imagine, a bad thing that people are more bent on entertainment than improvement. It is unnatural and unwholesome to keep the mind keyed up to a moral pitch all the time; and the man who is perpetually on the stretch and strain for self-culture seldom, if ever, gets the best culture. The richest, the finest, the highest personal qualities are not achieved in that way. "Culture is a kingdom that may be conquered by force, but can never be possessed by it." Improvement is a good thing to seek, but obedience to the laws of the universe is infinitely better. The object of life is living, not the working of one's self up into this or the other sort of creature. Whoever lives, totally and grandly, realizes his destiny. Our teachers are just beginning to learn that education should be made a pleasure instead of a penance. Knowledge should be absorbed, instead of being rammed into the mind like a bullet into a barrel that is too small for it. The reading of even the best books should be an entertainment and recreation in order to absorb and assimilate their contents, just as eating should be spiced with conversation and laughter that the food may digest and contribute its utmost nutriment to the body. And books of substantial quality and scholarship should be made as interesting as possible in style and arrangement that they can be enjoyed.

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