THE LOVE AFFAIRS OF A BIBLIOMANIAC

BY

EUGENE FIELD

Introduction

The determination to found a story or a series of sketches on the delights, adventures, and misadventures connected with bibliomania did not come impulsively to my brother. For many years, in short during the greater part of nearly a quarter of a century of journalistic work, he had celebrated in prose and verse, and always in his happiest and most delightful vein, the pleasures of book-hunting. Himself an indefatigable collector of books, the possessor of a library as valuable as it was interesting, a library containing volumes obtained only at the cost of great personal sacrifice, he was in the most active sympathy with the disease called bibliomania, and knew, as few comparatively poor men have known, the half-pathetic, half-humorous side of that incurable

mental infirmity.

The newspaper column, to which he contributed almost daily for twelve years, comprehended many sly digs and gentle scoffings at those of his unhappy fellow citizens who became notorious, through his instrumentality, in their devotion to old book-shelves and auction sales. And all the time none was more assiduous than this same good-natured cynic in running down a musty prize, no matter what its cost or what the attending difficulties. "I save others, myself I cannot save," was his humorous cry.

In his published writings are many evidences of my brother's appreciation of what he has somewhere characterized the "soothing affliction of bibliomania." Nothing of book-hunting love has been more happily expressed than "The Bibliomaniac's Prayer," in which the troubled petitioner fervently asserts:

"But if, O Lord, it pleaseth Thee To keep me in temptation's way, I humbly ask that I may be Most notably beset to -day; Let my temptation be a book, Which I shall purchase, hold and keep, Whereon, when other men shall look, They'll wail to know I got it cheap."

And again, in "The Bibliomaniac's Bride," nothing breathes better the spirit of the incurable patient than this:

"Prose for me when I wished for prose, Verse when to verse inclined, — Forever bringing sweet repose To body, heart and mind. Oh, I should bind this priceless prize In bindings full and fine, And keep her where no human eyes Should see her charms, but mine!"

In "Dear Old London" the poet wailed that "a splendid Horace cheap for cash" laughed at his poverty, and in "Dibdin's Ghost" he revelled in the delights that await the bibliomaniac in the future state, where there is no admission to the women folk who, "wanting victuals, make a fuss if we buy books instead"; while in "Flail, Trask and Bisland" is the very essence of bibliomania, the unquenchable thirst for possession. And yet, despite these self-

accusations, bibliophily rather than bibliomania would be the word to characterize his conscientious purpose. If he purchased quaint and rare books it was to own them to the full extent, inwardly as well as outwardly. The mania for books kept him continually buying; the love of books supervened to make them a part of himself and his life.

Toward the close of August of the present year my brother wrote the first chapter of "The Love Affairs of a Bibliomaniac." At that time he was in an exhausted physical condition and apparently unfit for any protracted literary labor. But the prospect of gratifying a long-cherished ambition, the delight of beginning the story he had planned so hopefully, seemed to give him new strength, and he threw himself into the work with an enthusiasm that was, alas, misleading to those who had noted fearfully his declining vigor of body. For years no literary occupation had seemed to give him equal pleasure, and in the discussion of the progress of his writing from day to day his eye would brighten, all of his old animation would return, and everything would betray the lively interest he felt in the creature of his imagination in whom he was living over the delights of the book-hunter's chase. It was his ardent wish that this work, for the fulfilment of which he had been so long preparing, should be, as he playfully expressed it, a monument of apologetic compensation to a class of people he had so humorously maligned, and those who knew him intimately will recognize in the shortcomings of the bibliomaniac the humble confession of his own weaknesses.

It is easy to understand from the very nature of the undertaking that it was practically limitless; that a bibliomaniac of so many years' experience could prattle on indefinitely concerning his "love affairs," and at the same time be in no danger of repetition. Indeed my brother's plans at the outset were not definitely formed. He would say, when questioned or joked about these amours, that he was in the easy position of Sam Weller when he indited his famous

valentine, and could "pull up" at any moment. One week he would contend that a book-hunter ought to be good for a year at least, and the next week he would argue as strongly that it was time to send the old man into winter quarters and go to press. But though the approach of cold weather increased his physical indisposition, he was not the less interested in his prescribed hours of labor, howbeit his weakness warned him that he should say to his book, as his much-loved Horace had written:

> "Fuge quo descendere gestis:
> Non erit emisso reditis tibi."

Was it strange that his heart should relent, and that he should write on, unwilling to give the word of dismissal to the book whose preparation had been a work of such love and solace?

During the afternoon of Saturday, November 2, the nineteenth instalment of "The Love Affairs" was written. It was the conclusion of his literary life. The verses supposably contributed by Judge Methuen's friend, with which the chapter ends, were the last words written by Eugene Field. He was at that time apparently quite as well as on any day during the fall months, and neither he nor any member of his family had the slightest premonition that death was hovering about the household. The next day, though still feeling indisposed, he was at times up and about, always cheerful and full of that sweetness and sunshine which, in his last years, seem now to have been the preparation for the life beyond. He spoke of the chapter he had written the day before, and it was then that he outlined his plan of completing the work. One chapter only remained to be written, and it was to chronicle the death of the old bibliomaniac, but not until he had unexpectedly fallen heir to a very rare and almost priceless copy of Horace, which acquisition marked the pinnacle of the book-hunter's conquest. True to his love for the Sabine singer, the western poet characterized the immortal odes of twenty centuries gone the greatest happiness of

bibliomania.

In the early morning of November 4 the soul of Eugene Field passed upward. On the table, folded and sealed, were the memoirs of the old man upon whom the sentence of death had been pronounced. On the bed in the corner of the room, with one arm thrown over his breast, and the smile of peace and rest on his tranquil face, the poet lay. All around him, on the shelves and in the cases, were the books he loved so well. Ah, who shall say that on that morning his fancy was not verified, and that as the gray light came reverently through the window, those cherished volumes did not bestir themselves, awaiting the cheery voice: "Good day to you, my sweet friends. How lovingly they beam upon me, and how glad they are that my rest has been unbroken."

Could they beam upon you less lovingly, great heart, in the chamber warmed by your affection and now sanctified by death? Were they less glad to know that the repose would be unbroken forevermore, since it came the glorious reward, my brother, of the friend who went gladly to it through his faith, having striven for it through his works?

ROSWELL MARTIN FIELD Buena Park, December, 1895.

The Chapters in this Book

I

MY FIRST LOVE

At this moment, when I am about to begin the most important undertaking of my life, I recall the sense of abhorrence with which I have at different times read the confessions of men famed for their prowess in the realm of love. These boastings have always shocked me, for I reverence love as the noblest of the passions, and it is impossible for me to conceive how one who has truly fallen victim to its benign influence can ever thereafter speak flippantly of it.

Yet there have been, and there still are, many who take a seeming delight in telling you how many conquests they have made, and they not infrequently have the bad taste to explain with wearisome prolixity the ways and the means whereby those conquests were wrought; as, forsooth, an unfeeling huntsman is forever boasting of the game he has slaughtered and is forever dilating upon the

repulsive details of his butcheries.

I have always contended that one who is in love (and having once been in love is to be always in love) has, actually, no confession to make. Love is so guileless, so proper, so pure a passion as to involve none of those things which require or which admit of confession. He, therefore, who surmises that in this exposition of my affaires du coeur there is to be any betrayal of confidences, or any discussion, suggestion, or hint likely either to shame love or its votaries or to bring a blush to the cheek of the fastidious—he is grievously in error.

Nor am I going to boast; for I have made no conquests. I am in no sense a hero. For many, very many years I have walked in a pleasant garden, enjoying sweet odors and soothing spectacles; no predetermined itinerary has controlled my course; I have wandered whither I pleased, and very many times I have strayed so far into the tangle-wood and thickets as almost to have lost my way. And now it is my purpose to walk that pleasant garden once more, inviting you to bear me company and to share with me what satisfaction may accrue from an old man's return to old-time places and old-time loves.

As a child I was serious-minded. I cared little for those sports which usually excite the ardor of youth. To out-of-door games and exercises I had particular aversion. I was born in a southern latitude, but at the age of six years I went to live with my grandmother in New Hampshire, both my parents having fallen victims to the cholera. This change from the balmy temperature of the South to the rigors of the North was not agreeable to me, and I have always held it responsible for that delicate health which has attended me through life.

My grandmother encouraged my disinclination to play; she recognized in me that certain seriousness of mind which I

remember to have heard her say I inherited from her, and she determined to make of me what she had failed to make of any of her own sons—a professional expounder of the only true faith of Congregationalism. For this reason, and for the further reason that at the tender age of seven years I publicly avowed my desire to become a clergyman, an ambition wholly sincere at that time—for these reasons was I duly installed as prime favorite in my grandmother's affections.

As distinctly as though it were but yesterday do I recall the time when I met my first love. It was in the front room of the old homestead, and the day was a day in spring. The front room answered those purposes which are served by the so-called parlor of the present time. I remember the low ceiling, the big fireplace, the long, broad mantelpiece, the andirons and fender of brass, the tall clock with its jocund and roseate moon, the bellows that was always wheezy, the wax flowers under a glass globe in the corner, an allegorical picture of Solomon's temple, another picture of little Samuel at prayer, the high, stiff-back chairs, the foot-stool with its gayly embroidered top, the mirror in its gilt-and-black frame—all these things I remember well, and with feelings of tender reverence, and yet that day I now recall was well-nigh threescore and ten years ago!

Best of all I remember the case in which my grandmother kept her books, a mahogany structure, massive and dark, with doors composed of diamond-shaped figures of glass cunningly set in a framework of lead. I was in my seventh year then, and I had learned to read I know not when. The back and current numbers of the "Well-Spring" had fallen prey to my insatiable appetite for literature. With the story of the small boy who stole a pin, repented of and confessed that crime, and then became a good and great man, I was as familiar as if I myself had invented that ingenious and instructive tale; I could lisp the moral numbers of Watts and the didactic hymns of Wesley, and the annual reports of the

American Tract Society had already revealed to me the sphere of usefulness in which my grandmother hoped I would ultimately figure with discretion and zeal. And yet my heart was free; wholly untouched of that gentle yet deathless passion which was to become my delight, my inspiration, and my solace, it awaited the coming of its first love.

Upon one of those shelves yonder—it is the third shelf from the top, fourth compartment to the right—is that old copy of the "New England Primer," a curious little, thin, square book in faded blue board covers. A good many times I have wondered whether I ought not to have the precious little thing sumptuously attired in the finest style known to my binder; indeed, I have often been tempted to exchange the homely blue board covers for flexible levant, for it occurred to me that in this way I could testify to my regard for the treasured volume. I spoke of this one day to my friend Judge Methuen, for I have great respect for his judgment.

"It would be a desecration," said he, "to deprive the book of its original binding. What! Would you tear off and cast away the covers which have felt the caressing pressure of the hands of those whose memory you revere? The most sacred of sentiments should forbid that act of vandalism!"

I never think or speak of the "New England Primer" that I do not recall Captivity Waite, for it was Captivity who introduced me to the Primer that day in the springtime of sixty-three years ago. She was of my age, a bright, pretty girl—a very pretty, an exceptionally pretty girl, as girls go. We belonged to the same Sunday-school class. I remember that upon this particular day she brought me a russet apple. It was she who discovered the Primer in the mahogany case, and what was not our joy as we turned over the tiny pages together and feasted our eyes upon the vivid pictures and perused the absorbingly interesting text! What wonder that together we wept tears of sympathy at the harrowing recital of the

fate of John Rogers!

Even at this remote date I cannot recall that experience with Captivity, involving as it did the wood-cut representing the unfortunate Rogers standing in an impossible bonfire and being consumed thereby in the presence of his wife and their numerous progeny, strung along in a pitiful line across the picture for artistic effect—even now, I say, I cannot contemplate that experience and that wood-cut without feeling lumpy in my throat and moist about my eyes.

How lasting are the impressions made upon the youthful mind! Through the many busy years that have elapsed since first I tasted the thrilling sweets of that miniature Primer I have not forgotten that "young Obadias, David, Josias, all were pious"; that "Zaccheus he did climb the Tree our Lord to see"; and that "Vashti for Pride was set aside"; and still with many a sympathetic shudder and tingle do I recall Captivity's overpowering sense of horror, and mine, as we lingered long over the portraitures of Timothy flying from Sin, of Xerxes laid out in funeral garb, and of proud Korah's troop partly submerged.

> My Book and Heart
> Must never part.

So runs one of the couplets in this little Primer-book, and right truly can I say that from the springtime day sixty-odd years ago, when first my heart went out in love to this little book, no change of scene or of custom no allurement of fashion, no demand of mature years, has abated that love. And herein is exemplified the advantage which the love of books has over the other kinds of love. Women are by nature fickle, and so are men; their friendships are liable to dissipation at the merest provocation or the slightest pretext.

Not so, however, with books, for books cannot change. A thousand

years hence they are what you find them to-day, speaking the same words, holding forth the same cheer, the same promise, the same comfort; always constant, laughing with those who laugh and weeping with those who weep.

Captivity Waite was an exception to the rule governing her sex. In all candor I must say that she approached closely to a realization of the ideals of a book—a sixteenmo, if you please, fair to look upon, of clear, clean type, well ordered and well edited, amply margined, neatly bound; a human book whose text, as represented by her disposition and her mind, corresponded felicitously with the comeliness of her exterior. This child was the great-great-granddaughter of Benjamin Waite, whose family was carried off by Indians in 1677. Benjamin followed the party to Canada, and after many months of search found and ransomed the captives.

The historian has properly said that the names of Benjamin Waite and his companion in their perilous journey through the wilderness to Canada should "be memorable in all the sad or happy homes of this Connecticut valley forever." The child who was my friend in youth, and to whom I may allude occasionally hereafter in my narrative, bore the name of one of the survivors of this Indian outrage, a name to be revered as a remembrancer of sacrifice and heroism.

II

THE BIRTH OF A NEW PASSION

When I was thirteen years old I went to visit my Uncle Cephas. My grandmother would not have parted with me even for that fortnight had she not actually been compelled to. It happened that she was

called to a meeting of the American Tract Society, and it was her intention to pay a visit to her cousin, Royall Eastman, after she had discharged the first and imperative duty she owed the society. Mrs. Deacon Ranney was to have taken me and provided for my temporal and spiritual wants during grandmother's absence, but at the last moment the deacon came down with one of his spells of quinsy, and no other alternative remained but to pack me off to Nashua, where my Uncle Cephas lived.

This involved considerable expense, for the stage fare was three shillings each way: it came particularly hard on grandmother, inasmuch as she had just paid her road tax and had not yet received her semi-annual dividends on her Fitchburg Railway stock. Indifferent, however, to every sense of extravagance and to all other considerations except those of personal pride, I rode away atop of the stage-coach, full of exultation. As we rattled past the Waite house I waved my cap to Captivity and indulged in the pleasing hope that she would be lonesome without me. Much of the satisfaction of going away arises from the thought that those you leave behind are likely to be wretchedly miserable during your absence.

My Uncle Cephas lived in a house so very different from my grandmother's that it took me some time to get used to the place. Uncle Cephas was a lawyer, and his style of living was not at all like grandmother's; he was to have been a minister, but at twelve years of age he attended the county fair, and that incident seemed to change the whole bent of his life. At twenty-one he married Samantha Talbott, and that was another blow to grandmother, who always declared that the Talbotts were a shiftless lot. However, I was agreeably impressed with Uncle Cephas and Aunt 'Manthy, for they welcomed me very cordially and turned me over to my little cousins, Mary and Henry, and bade us three make merry to the best of our ability. These first favorable impressions of my uncle's family were confirmed when I discovered that for supper

we had hot biscuit and dried beef warmed up in cream gravy, a diet which, with all due respect to grandmother, I considered much more desirable than dry bread and dried-apple sauce.

Aha, old Crusoe! I see thee now in yonder case smiling out upon me as cheerily as thou didst smile those many years ago when to a little boy thou broughtest the message of Romance! And I do love thee still, and I shall always love thee, not only for thy benefaction in those ancient days, but also for the light and the cheer which thy genius brings to all ages and conditions of humanity.

My Uncle Cephas's library was stored with a large variety of pleasing literature. I did not observe a glut of theological publications, and I will admit that I felt somewhat aggrieved personally when, in answer to my inquiry, I was told that there was no "New England Primer" in the collection. But this feeling was soon dissipated by the absorbing interest I took in De Foe's masterpiece, a work unparalleled in the realm of fiction.

I shall not say that "Robinson Crusoe" supplanted the Primer in my affections; this would not be true. I prefer to say what is the truth; it was my second love. Here again we behold another advantage which the lover of books has over the lover of women. If he be a genuine lover he can and should love any number of books, and this polybibliophily is not to the disparagement of any one of that number. But it is held by the expounders of our civil and our moral laws that he who loveth one woman to the exclusion of all other women speaketh by that action the best and highest praise both of his own sex and of hers.

I thank God continually that it hath been my lot in life to found an empire in my heart—no cramped and wizened borough wherein one jealous mistress hath exercised her petty tyranny, but an expansive and ever-widening continent divided and subdivided into dominions, jurisdictions, caliphates, chiefdoms,

seneschalships, and prefectures, wherein tetrarchs, burgraves, maharajahs, palatines, seigniors, caziques, nabobs, emirs, nizams, and nawabs hold sway, each over his special and particular realm, and all bound together in harmonious cooperation by the conciliating spirit of polybibliophily!

Let me not be misunderstood; for I am not a woman-hater. I do not regret the acquaintances—nay, the friendships—I have formed with individuals of the other sex. As a philosopher it has behooved me to study womankind, else I should not have appreciated the worth of these other better loves. Moreover, I take pleasure in my age in associating this precious volume or that with one woman or another whose friendship came into my life at the time when I was reading and loved that book.

The other day I found my nephew William swinging in the hammock on the porch with his girl friend Celia; I saw that the young people were reading Ovid. "My children," said I, "count this day a happy one. In the years of after life neither of you will speak or think of Ovid and his tender verses without recalling at the same moment how of a gracious afternoon in distant time you sat side by side contemplating the ineffably precious promises of maturity and love."

I am not sure that I do not approve that article in Judge Methuen's creed which insists that in this life of ours woman serves a probationary period for sins of omission or of commission in a previous existence, and that woman's next step upward toward the final eternity of bliss is a period of longer or of shorter duration, in which her soul enters into a book to be petted, fondled, beloved and cherished by some good man—like the Judge, or like myself, for that matter.

This theory is not an unpleasant one; I regard it as much more acceptable than those so-called scientific demonstrations which

would make us suppose that we are descended from tree-climbing and bug-eating simians. However, it is far from my purpose to enter upon any argument of these questions at this time, for Judge Methuen himself is going to write a book upon the subject, and the edition is to be limited to two numbered and signed copies upon Japanese vellum, of which I am to have one and the Judge the other.

The impression I made upon Uncle Cephas must have been favorable, for when my next birthday rolled around there came with it a book from Uncle Cephas—my third love, Grimm's "Household Stories." With the perusal of this monumental work was born that passion for fairy tales and folklore which increased rather than diminished with my maturer years. Even at the present time I delight in a good fairy story, and I am grateful to Lang and to Jacobs for the benefit they have conferred upon me and the rest of English-reading humanity through the medium of the fairy books and the folk tales they have translated and compiled. Baring-Gould and Lady Wilde have done noble work in the same realm; the writings of the former have interested me particularly, for together with profound learning in directions which are specially pleasing to me, Baring-Gould has a distinct literary touch which invests his work with a grace indefinable but delicious and persuasive.

I am so great a lover of and believer in fairy tales that I once organized a society for the dissemination of fairy literature, and at the first meeting of this society we resolved to demand of the board of education to drop mathematics from the curriculum in the public schools and to substitute therefor a four years' course in fairy literature, to be followed, if the pupil desired, by a post-graduate course in demonology and folk-lore. We hired and fitted up large rooms, and the cause seemed to be flourishing until the second month's rent fell due. It was then discovered that the treasury was empty; and with this discovery the society ended its existence,

without having accomplished any tangible result other than the purchase of a number of sofas and chairs, for which Judge Methuen and I had to pay.

Still, I am of the opinion (and Judge Methuen indorses it) that we need in this country of ours just that influence which the fairy tale exerts. We are becoming too practical; the lust for material gain is throttling every other consideration. Our babes and sucklings are no longer regaled with the soothing tales of giants, ogres, witches, and fairies; their hungry, receptive minds are filled with stories about the pursuit and slaughter of unoffending animals, of war and of murder, and of those questionable practices whereby a hero is enriched and others are impoverished. Before he is out of his swaddling-cloth the modern youngster is convinced that the one noble purpose in life is to get, get, get, and keep on getting of worldly material. The fairy tale is tabooed because, as the sordid parent alleges, it makes youth unpractical.

One consequence of this deplorable condition is, as I have noticed (and as Judge Methuen has, too), that the human eye is diminishing in size and fulness, and is losing its lustre. By as much as you take the God-given grace of fancy from man, by so much do you impoverish his eyes. The eye is so beautiful and serves so very many noble purposes, and is, too, so ready in the expression of tenderness, of pity, of love, of solicitude, of compassion, of dignity, of every gentle mood and noble inspiration, that in that metaphor which contemplates the eternal vigilance of the Almighty we recognize the best poetic expression of the highest human wisdom.

My nephew Timothy has three children, two boys and a girl. The elder boy and the girl have small black eyes; they are as devoid of fancy as a napkin is of red corpuscles; they put their pennies into a tin bank, and they have won all the marbles and jack-stones in the neighborhood. They do not believe in Santa Claus or in fairies or

in witches; they know that two nickels make a dime, and their golden rule is to do others as others would do them. The other boy (he has been christened Matthew, after me) has a pair of large, round, deep-blue eyes, expressive of all those emotions which a keen, active fancy begets.

Matthew can never get his fill of fairy tales, and how the dear little fellow loves Santa Claus! He sees things at night; he will not go to bed in the dark; he hears and understands what the birds and crickets say, and what the night wind sings, and what the rustling leaves tell. Wherever Matthew goes he sees beautiful pictures and hears sweet music; to his impressionable soul all nature speaks its wisdom and its poetry. God! how I love that boy! And he shall never starve! A goodly share of what I have shall go to him! But this clause in my will, which the Judge recently drew for me, will, I warrant me, give the dear child the greatest happiness:

"Item. To my beloved grandnephew and namesake, Matthew, I do bequeath and give (in addition to the lands devised and the stocks, bonds and moneys willed to him, as hereinabove specified) the two mahogany bookcases numbered 11 and 13, and the contents thereof, being volumes of fairy and folk tales of all nations, and dictionaries and other treatises upon demonology, witchcraft, mythology, magic and kindred subjects, to be his, his heirs, and his assigns, forever."

III

THE LUXURY OF READING IN BED

Last night, having written what you have just read about the benefits of fairy literature, I bethought me to renew my