

THE DELICIOUS VICE

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Second Edition

(Revised and containing new material)

CHICAGO THE PRAIRIELAND PUBLISHING CO. 1918 Printed originally in the

Louisville Courier-Journal. Reprinted by courtesy.

First edition, Cleveland, Burrows Bros., 1907.

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I.

A RHAPSODY ON THE NOBLE PROFESSION OF NOVEL READING

It must have been at about the good-bye age of forty that Thomas Moore, that choleric and pompous yet genial little Irish gentleman, turned a sigh into good marketable "copy" for Grub Street and with shrewd economy got two full pecuniary bites out of one melancholy apple of reflection:

"Kind friends around me fall

Like leaves in wintry weather,"

—he sang of his own dead heart in the stilly night.

"Thus kindly I scatter thy leaves on the bed

Where thy mates of the garden lie scentless and dead."

—he sang to the dying rose. In the red month of October the rose is forty years old, as roses go. How small the world has grown to a man of forty, if he has put his eyes, his ears and his brain to the uses for which they are adapted. And as for time—why, it is no longer than a kite string. At about the age of forty everything that can happen to a man, death excepted, has happened; happiness has gone to the devil or is a mere habit; the blessing of poverty has been permanently secured or you are exhausted with the cares of wealth; you can see around the corner or you do not care to see around it; in a word—that is, considering mental existence—the bell has rung on you and you are up

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against a steady grind for the remainder of your life. It is then there comes to the habitual novel reader the inevitable day when, in anguish of heart, looking back over his life, he—wishes he hadn't; then he asks himself the bitter question if there are not things he has done that he wishes he hadn't. Melancholy marks him for its own. He sits in his room some winter evening, the lamp swarming shadowy seductions, the grate glowing with siren invitation, the cigar box within easy reach for that moment when the pending sacrifice between his teeth shall be burned out; his feet upon the familiar corner of the mantel at that automatically calculated altitude which permits the weight of the upper part of the body to fall exactly upon the second joint from the lower end of the vertebral column as it rests in the comfortable depression created by continuous wear in the cushion of that particular chair to which every honest man who has acquired the library vice sooner or later gets attached with a love no misfortune can destroy. As he sits thus, having closed the lids of, say, some old favorite of his youth, he will inevitably ask himself if it would not have been better for him if he hadn't. And the question once asked must be answered; and it will be an honest answer, too. For no scoundrel was ever addicted to the delicious vice of novel-reading. It is too tame for him. "There is no money in it."

And every habitual novel-reader will answer that question he has asked himself, after a sigh. A sigh that will echo from the tropic deserted

island of Juan Fernandez to that utmost ice-bound point of Siberia where by chance or destiny the seven nails in the sole of a certain mysterious person's shoe, in the month of October, 1831, formed a cross—thus: while on the American promontory opposite, "a young and handsome woman replied to the man's despairing gesture by silently pointing to heaven."

The Wandering Jew may be gone, but the theater of that appalling prologue still exists unchanged. That sigh will penetrate the gloomy cell of the Abbe Faria, the frightful dungeons of the Inquisition, the gilded halls of Vanity Fair, the deep forests of Brahmin and fakir, the jousting list, the audience halls and the petits cabinets of kings of France, sound over the trackless and storm-beaten ocean—will echo, in short, wherever warm blood has jumped in the veins of honest men and wherever vice has sooner or later been stretched groveling in the dust at the feet of triumphant virtue.

And so, sighing to the uttermost ends of the earth, the old novel-reader will confess that he wishes he hadn't. Had not read all those novels

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that troop through his memory. Because, if he hadn't—and it is the impossibility of the alternative that chills his soul with the despair of cruel realization—if he hadn't, you see, he could begin at the very first, right then and there, and read the whole blessed business through for the first time. For the FIRST TIME, mark you! Is there anywhere in this great round world a novel reader of true genius who would not do that with the joy of a child and the thankfulness of a sage?

Such a dream would be the foundation of the story of a really noble Dr. Faustus. How contemptible is the man who, having staked his life freely upon a career, whines at the close and begs for another chance; just one more—and a different career! It is no more than Mr. Jack Hamlin, a friend from Calaveras County, California, would call "the baby act," or his compeer, Mr. John Oakhurst, would denominate "a squeal." How glorious, on the other hand, is the man who has spent his life in his own way, and, at its eventide, waves his hand to the sinking sun and cries out: "Goodbye; but if I could do so, I should be glad to go over it all again with you—just as it was!" If honesty is rated in heaven as we have been taught to believe, depend upon it the novel-reader who sighs to eat the apple he has just devoured, will have no trouble hereafter.

What a great flutter was created a few years ago when a blind multi-millionaire of New York offered to pay a million dollars in cash to any scientist, savant or surgeon in the world who would restore his sight. Of course he would! It was no price at all to offer for the service—considering the millions remaining. It was no more to him than it would be to me to offer ten dollars for a peep at Paradise. Poor as I am I will give any man in the world one hundred dollars in cash who will enable me to remove every trace of memory of M. Alexandre Dumas' "Three Guardsmen," so that I may open that glorious book with the virgin capacity of youth to enjoy its full delight. More; I will duplicate the same offer for any one or all of the following:

"Les Miserables," of M. Hugo.

"Don Quixote," of Senor Cervantes.

"Vanity Fair," of Mr. Thackeray.

"David Copperfield," of Mr. Dickens.

"The Cloister and the Hearth," of Mr. Reade.

And if my good friend, Isaac of York, is lending money at the old stand and will take pianos, pictures, furniture, dress suits and plain

household plate as collateral, upon even moderate valuation, I will go fifty dollars each upon the following:

"The Count of Monte Cristo," of M. Dumas.

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"The Wandering Jew," of M. Sue.

"The Memoirs of Barry Lyndon, Esq.," of Mr. Thackeray.

"Treasure Island," of Mr. Robbie Stevenson.

"The Vicar of Wakefield," of Mr. Goldsmith.

"Pere Goriot," of M. de Balzac.

"Ivanhoe," of Baronet Scott.

(Any one previously unnamed of the whole layout of M. Dumas, excepting only a paretic volume entitled "The Conspirators.")

Now, the man who can do the trick for one novel can do it for all—and there's a thousand dollars waiting to be earned, and a blessing also.

It's a bald "bluff," of course, because it can't be done as we all know.

I might offer a million with safety. If it ever could have been done the

noble intellectual aristocracy of novel-readers would have been reduced to a condition of penury and distress centuries ago.

For, who can put fetters upon even the smallest second of eternity? Who

can repeat a joy or duplicate a sweet sorrow? Who has ever had more than one first sweetheart, or more than one first kiss under the honeysuckle?

Or has ever seen his name in print for the first time, ever again? Is it any wonder that all these inexplicable longings, these hopeless hopes, were summed up in the heart-cry of Faust—

"Stay, yet awhile, O moment of beauty."

Yet, I maintain, Dr. Faustus was a weak creature. He begged to be given another and wholly different chance to linger with beauty. How much nobler the magnificent courage of the veteran novel-reader, who in the old age of his service, asks only that he may be permitted to do again all that he has done, blindly, humbly, loyally, as before.

Don't I know? Have I not been there? It is no child's play, the life of a man who—paraphrasing the language of Spartacus, the much neglected hero of the ages—has met upon the printed page every shape of perilous adventure and dangerous character that the broad empire of fiction could furnish, and never yet lowered his arm. Believe me it is no carpet duty to have served on the British privateers in Guiana, under Commodore Kingsley, alongside of Salvation Yeo; to have been a loyal member of Thuggee and cast the scarf for Bowanee; to have watched the tortures of Beatrice Cenci (pronounced as written in honest English, and I spit upon the weaklings of the service who imagine that any freak of woman called

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Bee-ah-treech-y Chon-chy could have endured the agonies related of that sainted lady)—to have watched those tortures, I say, without breaking down; to have fought under the walls of Acre with Richard Coeur de Lion; to have crawled, amid rats and noxious vapors, with Jean Valjean through the sewers of Paris; to have dragged weary miles through the snow with Uncas, Chief of the Mohicans; to have lived among wild beasts with Morok the lion tamer; to have charged with the impis of Umslopogaas; to have sailed before the mast with Vanderdecken, spent fourteen gloomy years in the next cell to Edmund Dantes, ferreted out the murders in the Rue Morgue, advised Monsieur Le Cocq and given years of life's prime in tedious professional assistance to that anointed idiot and pestiferous scoundrel, Tittlebat Titmouse! Equally, of course, it has not been all horror and despair. Life averages up fairly, as any novel-reader will admit, and there has been much of delight—even luxury and idleness—between the carnage hours of battle. Is it not so? Ask that

boyish-hearted old scamp whom you have seen scuttling away from the circulating library with M. St. Pierre's memoirs of young Paul and his beloved Virginia under his arm; or stepping briskly out of the book store hugging to his left side a carefully wrapped biography of Lady Diana Vernon, Mlle. de la Valliere, or Madame Margaret Woffington; or in fact any of a thousand charming ladies whom it is certain he had met before. Ladies too, who, born whensoever, are not one day older since he last saw them. Nearly a hundred years of Parisian residence have not served to induce the Princess Haydee of Yanina to forego her picturesque Greek gowns and coiffures, or to alter the somewhat embarrassing status of her relations with her striking but gloomy protector, the Count of Monte Cristo.

The old memories are crowded with pleasures. Those delicious mornings in the allee of the park, where you were permitted to see Cosette with her old grandfather, M. Fauchelevent; those hours of sweet pain when it was impossible to determine whether it was Rebecca or Rowena who seemed to give most light to the day; the flirtations with Blanche Amory, and the notes placed in the hollow tree; the idyllic devotion of Little Emily, dating from the morning when you saw her dress fluttering on the beam as she ran along it, lightly, above the flowing tide—(devotion that is yet tender, for, God forgive you Steerforth as I do, you could not smirch that pure heart;) the melancholy, yet sweet sorrow, with which you saw the loved and lost Little Eva borne to her grave over which the mocking-bird now sings his liquid requiem. Has it not been sweet good fortune to love Maggie Tulliver, Margot of Savoy, Dora Spenlow (undeclared because she was an honest wife—even though of a most conceited and commonplace jackass, totally undeserving of her); Agnes Wicklow (a passion quickly cured when she took Dora's pitiful leavings), and poor ill-fated Marie Antoinette? You can name dozens if you have been brought up in good literary society.

These love affairs may be owned freely, as being perfectly honorable,

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even if hopeless. And, of course, there have been gallantries—mere affaires du jour—such as every man occasionally engages in. Sometimes they seemed serious, but only for a moment. There was Beatrix Esmond, for whom I could certainly have challenged His Grace of Hamilton, had not Lord Mohun done the work for me. Wandering down the street in London one night, in a moment of weak admiration for her unrivalled nerve and aplomb, I was hesitating—whether to call on Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, knowing that her thick-headed husband was in hoc for debt—when the door of her house crashed open and that old scoundrel, Lord Steyne, came wildly down the steps, his livid face blood-streaked, his topcoat on his arm and a dreadful look in his eye. The world knows the rest as I learned it half an hour later at the greengrocer's, where the Crawleys owed an inexcusably large bill. Then the Duchess de Langeais—but all this is really private.

After all, a man never truly loves but once. And somewhere in Scotland there is a mound above the gentle, tender and heroic Helen Mar, where lies buried the first love of my soul. That mound, O lovely and loyal Helen, was watered by the first blinding and unselfish tears that ever sprang from my eyes. You were my first love; others may come and inevitably they go, but you are still here, under the pencil pocket of my waistcoat.

Who can write in such a state? It is only fair to take a rest and brace up. [Blank Page]

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NOVEL-READERS

AS DISTINGUISHED FROM WOMEN AND NIBBLERS AND AMATEURS

There is, of course, but one sort of novel-reader who is of any importance. He is the man who began under the age of fourteen and is still sticking to it—at whatever age he may be—and full of a terrifying anxiety lest he may be called away in the midst of preliminary announcements of some pet author's "next forthcoming." For my own part I cannot conceive dying with resignation knowing that the publishers were binding up at the time anything of Henryk Sienkiewicz's or Thomas Hardy's. So it is important that a man begin early, because he will have to quit all too soon.

There are no women novel-readers. There are women who read novels, of course; but it is a far cry from reading novels to being a novel-reader. It is not in the nature of a woman. The crown of woman's character is her devotion, which incarnate delicacy and tenderness exalt into perfect beauty of sacrifice. Those qualities could no more live amid the clashings of indiscriminate human passions than a butterfly wing could go between the mill rollers unscathed. Women utterly refuse to go on with a book if the subject goes against their settled opinions. They despise a

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novel—howsoever fine and stirring it may be—if there is any taint of unhappiness to the favorite at the close. But the most flagrant of all their incapacities in respect to fiction is the inability to appreciate the admirable achievements of heroes, unless the achievements are solely in behalf of women. And even in that event they complacently consider them to be a matter of course, and attach no particular importance to the perils or the hardships undergone. "Why shouldn't he?" they argue, with triumphant trust in ideals; "surely he loved her!"

There are many women who nibble at novels as they nibble at luncheon—there are also some hearty eaters; but 98 per cent of them detest Thackeray and refuse resolutely to open a second book of Robert Louis Stevenson. They scent an enemy of the sex in Thackeray, who never seems to be in earnest, and whose indignant sarcasm and melancholy truthfulness they shrink from. "It's only a story, anyhow," they argue again; "he might, at least write a pleasant one, instead of bringing in all sorts of disagreeable people—some of them positively disreputable." As for Stevenson, whom men read with the thrill of boyhood rising new in their veins, I believe in my soul women would tear leaves out of his novels to tie over the tops of preserve jars, and never dream of the sacrilege.

Now I hold Thackeray and Stevenson to be the absolute test of capacity for earnest novel-reading. Neither cares a snap of his fingers for anybody's prejudices, but goes the way of stern truth by the light of genius that shines within him.

If you could ever pin a woman down to tell you what she thought, instead of telling you what she thinks it is proper to tell you, or what she thinks will please you, you would find she has a religious conviction that Dot Perrybingle in "The Cricket of the Hearth," and Ouida's Lord Chandos were actually a materializable man and a reasonable gentleman, either of whom might be met with anywhere in their proper circles, I would be willing to stand trial for perjury on the statement that I've known admirable women—far above the average, really showing signs of moral discrimination—who have sniveled pitifully over Nancy Sykes and sniffed scornfully at Mrs. Tess Durbeyfield Clare. It is due to their constitution and social heredity. Women do not strive and yearn and stalk abroad for the glorious pot of intellectual gold at the end of the

rainbow; they pick and choose and, having chosen, sit down straightway and become content. And a state of contentment is an abomination in the sight of man. Contentment is to be sought for by great masculine minds only with the purpose of being sure never quite to find it.

For all practical purposes, therefore—except perhaps as object lessons of "the incorrect method" in reading novels—women, as novel-readers, must be considered as not existing. And, of course, no offense is intended. But if there be any weak-kneed readers who prefer the

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gilt-wash of pretty politeness to the solid gold of truth, let them understand that I am not to be frightened away from plain facts by any charge of bad manners.

On the contrary, now that this disagreeable interruption has been forced upon me—certainly not through any seeking of mine—it may be better to speak out and settle the matter. Men who have the happiness of being in the married state know that nothing is to be gained by failing to settle instantly with women who contradict and oppose them. Who was that mellow philosopher in one of Trollope's tiresomely clever novels who said: "My word for it, John, a husband ought not to take a cane to his wife too soon. He should fairly wait till they are half-way home from the church—but not longer, not longer." Of course every man with a spark of intelligence and gallantry wishes that women COULD rise to real novel-reading. Think what courtship would be! Every true man wishes to heaven there was nothing more to be said against women than that they are not novel-readers. But can mere forgetting remove the canker? Do not all of us know that the abstract good of the very existence of woman is itself open to grave doubt—with no immediate hope of clearing up? Woman has certainly been thrust upon us. Is there any scrap of record to show that Adam asked for her? He was doing very well, was happy, prosperous and healthy. There was no certainty that her creation was one of that unquestionably wonderful series that occupied the six great days. We cannot conceal that her creation caused a great pain in Adam's side—undoubtedly the left side, in the region of the heart. She has been described by young and dauntless poets as "God's best afterthought;" but, now, really—and I advance the suggestion with no intention to be brutal but solely as a conscientious duty to the ascertainment of truth—why is it, that—. But let me try to present the matter in the most unobjectionable manner possible.

In reading over that marvelous account of creation I find frequent explicit declaration that God pronounced everything good after he had created it—except heaven and woman. I have maintained sometimes to stern, elderly ladies that this might have been an error of omission by early copyists, perpetuated and so become fixed in our translations. To other ladies, of other age and condition, to whom such propositions of scholarship might appear to be dull pedantry, I have ventured the gentlemanlike explanation that, as woman was the only living thing created that was good beyond doubt, perhaps God had paid her the special compliment of leaving the approval unspoken, as being in a sense supererogatory. At best, either of these dispositions of the matter is, of course, far-fetched, maybe even frivolous. The fact still remains by the record. And it is beyond doubt awkward and embarrassing, because ill-natured men can refer to it in moments of hatefulness—moments unfortunately too frequent.

Is it possible that this last creation was a mistake of Infinite Charity and Eternal Truth? That Charity forbore to acknowledge that it was a mistake and that Truth, in the very nature of its eternal essence, could

not say it was good? It is so grave a matter that one wonders Helvetius did not betray it, as he did that other secret about which the philosophers had agreed to keep mum, so that Herr Schopenhauer could write about it as he did about that other. Herr Schopenhauer certainly had the courage to speak with philosophical asperity of the gentle sex. It may be because he was never married. And then his mother wrote novels! I have been surprised that he was not accused of prejudice. But if all these everyday obstacles were absent there would yet remain insurmountable reasons why women can never be novel-readers in the sense that men are. Your wife, for instance, or the impenetrable mystery of womanhood that you contemplate making your wife some day—can you, honestly, now, as a self-respecting husband of either de facto or in futuro, quite agree to the spectacle of that adored lady sitting over across the hearth from you in the snug room, evening after evening, with her feet—however small and well-shaped—cocked up on the other end of the mantel and one of your own big colorado maduros bet ween her teeth! We men, and particularly novel-readers, are liberal even generous, in our views; but it is not in human nature to stand that!

Now, if a woman can not put her feet up and smoke, how in the name of heaven, can she seriously read novels? Certainly not sitting bolt upright, in order to prevent the back of her new gown from rubbing the chair; certainly not reclining upon a couch or in a hammock. A boy, yet too young to smoke may properly lie on his stomach on the floor and read novels, but the mature veteran will fight for his end of the mantel as for his wife and children. It is physiological necessity, inasmuch as the blood that would naturally go to the lower extremities, is thus measurably lessened in quantity and goes instead to the head, where a state of gentle congestion ensues, exciting the brain cells, setting free the imagination to roam hand in hand with intelligence under the spell of the wizard. There may be novel-readers who do not smoke at the game, but surely they cannot be quite earnest or honest—you had better put in writing all business agreements with this sort.

No boy can ever hope to become a really great or celebrated novel-reader who does not begin his apprenticeship under the age of fourteen, and, as I said before, stick to it as long as he lives. He must learn to scorn those frivolous, vacillating and purposeless ones who, after beginning properly, turn aside and whiling away their time on mere history, or science, or philosophy. In a sense these departments of literature are useful enough. They enable you often to perceive the most cunning and profoundly interesting touches in fiction. Then I have no doubt that, merely as mental exercise, they do some good in keeping the mind in training for the serious work of novel-reading. I have always been grateful to Carlyle's "French Revolution," if for nothing more than that its criss-cross, confusing and impressive dullness enabled me to find more pleasure in "A Tale of Two Cities" than was to be extracted from

any merit or interest in that unreal novel.

This much however, may be said of history, that it is looking up in these days as a result of studying the spirit of the novel. It was not many years ago that the ponderous gentlemen who write criticisms (chiefly because it has been forgotten how to stop that ancient waste of paper and ink) could find nothing more biting to say of Macaulay's "England" than that it was "a splendid work of imagination," of Froude's "Caesar" that it was "magnificent political fiction," and of Taine's "France" that "it was so fine it should have been history instead of

fiction." And ever since then the world has read only these three writers upon these three epochs—and many other men have been writing history upon the same model. No good novel-reader need be ashamed to read them, in fact. They are so like the real thing we find in the greatest novels, instead of being the usual pompous official lies of old-time history, that there are flesh, blood and warmth in them. In 1877, after the railway riots, legislative halls heard the French Revolution rehearsed from all points of view. In one capital, where I was reporting the debate, Old Oracle, with every fact at hand from "In the beginning" to the exact popular vote in 1876, talked two hours of accurate historical data from all the French histories, after which a young lawyer replied in fifteen minutes with a vivid picture of the popular conditions, the revolt and the result. Will it be allowable, in the interest of conveying exact impression, to say that Old Oracle was "swiped" off the earth? No other word will relieve my conscience. After it was all over I asked the young lawyer where he got his French history.

"From Dumas," he answered, "and from critical reviews of his novels. He's short on dates and documents, but he's long on the general facts." Why not? Are not novels history?

Book for book, is not a novel by a competent conscientious novelist just as truthful a record of typical men, manners and motives as formal history is of official men, events and motives?

There are persons created out of the dreams of genius so real, so actual, so burnt into the heart and mind of the world that they have become historical. Do they not show you, in the old Ursuline Convent at New Orleans, the cell where poor Manon Lescaut sat alone in tears? And do they not show you her very grave on the banks of the lake? Have I not stood by the simple grave at Richmond, Virginia, where never lay the body of Pocahontas and listened to the story of her burial there? One of the loveliest women I ever knew admits that every time she visits relatives at Salem she goes out to look at the mound over the broken heart of Hester Prynne, that dream daughter of genius who never actually lived or died, but who was and is and ever will be. Her grave can be easily pointed out, but where is that of Alexander, of Themistocles, of

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Aristotle, even of the first figure of history—Adam? Mark Twain found it for a joke. Dr. Hale was finally forced to write a preface to "The Man Without a Country" to declare that his hero was pure fiction and that the pathetic punishment so marvelously described was not only imaginary, but legally and actually impossible. It was because Philip Nolan had passed into history. I myself have met old men who knew sea captains that had met this melancholy prisoner at sea and looked upon him, had even spoken to him upon subjects not prohibited. And these old men did not hesitate to declare that Dr. Hale had lied in his denial and had repudiated the facts through cowardice or under compulsion from the War Department.

Indeed, so flexible, adaptable and penetrable is the style, and so admirably has the use and proper direction of the imagination been developed by the school of fiction, that every branch of literature has gained from it power, beauty and clearness. Nothing has aided more in the spread of liberal Christianity than the remarkable series of "Lives of Christ," from Straus to Farrar, not omitting particular mention of the singularly beautiful treatment of the subject by Renan. In all of these conscientious imagination has been used, as it is used in the highest works of fiction, to give to known facts the atmosphere and

vividness of truth in order that the spirit and personality of the surroundings of the Savior of Mankind might be newly understood by and made fresh to modern perception.

Of all books it is to be said—of novels as well—that none is great that is not true, and that cannot be true which does not carry inherence of truth. Now every book is true to some reader. The "Arabian Nights" tales do not seem impossible to a little child, the only delight him. The novels of "The Duchess" seem true to a certain class of readers, if only because they treat of a society to which those readers are entirely unaccustomed. "Robinson Crusoe" is a gospel to the world, and yet it is the most palpably and innocently impossible of books. It is so plausible because the author has ingeniously or accidentally set aside the usual earmarks of plausibility. When an author plainly and easily knows what the reader does not know and enough more to continue the chain of seeming reality of truth a little further, he convinces the reader of his truth and ability. Those men, therefore, who have been endowed with the genius almost unconsciously to absorb, classify, combine, arrange and dispense vast knowledge in a bold, striking or noble manner, are the recognized greatest men of genius for the simple reason that the readers of the world who know most recognize all they know in these writers, together with that spirit of sublime imagination that suggests still greater realms of truth and beauty. What Shakespeare was to the intellectual leaders of his day, "The Duchess" was to countless immature young folks of her day who were looking for "something to read." All truth is history, but all history is not truth. Written history is

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notoriously no well-cleaner.

III.

READING THE FIRST NOVEL

BEING MOSTLY REMINISCENCES OF EARLY CRIMES AND JOYS

Once more and for all, the career of a novel reader should be entered upon, if at all, under the age of fourteen. As much earlier as possible. The life of the intellect, as of its shadowy twin, imagination, begins early and develops miraculously. The inbred strains of nature lie exposed to influence as a mirror to reflections, and as open to impression as sensitized paper, upon which pictures may be printed and from which they may also fade out. The greater the variety of impressions that fall upon the young mind the more certain it is that the greatest strength of natural tendency will be touched and revealed. Good or bad, whichever it may be, let it come out as quickly as possible. How many men have never developed their fatal weaknesses until success was within reach and the edifice fell upon other innocent ones. Believe me, no innate scoundrel or brute will be much helped or hindered by stories. These have no turn or leisure for dreaming. They are eager for the actual touch of life. What would a dull-eyed glutton, famishing, not with hunger but with the cravings of digestive ferocity, find in Thackeray's "Memorials of Gormandizing" or "Barmecidal Feasts?" Such banquets are spread for the frugal, not one of whom would swap that immortal cook-book review for a dinner with Lucullus. Rascals will not read. Men of action do not read. They look upon it as the gambler does upon the game where "no money passes." It may almost be said that the capacity for novel-reading is the patent of just and noble minds. You never heard of a great novel-reader who was notorious as a criminal. There have been literary criminals, I grant you—Eugene Aram Dr. Dodd, Prof. Webster, who murdered Parkman, and others. But they were writers, not readers And they did not write novels. Mr. Aram wrote scientific and

school books, as did Prof. Webster, and Dr. Wainwright wrote beautiful sermons. We never do sufficiently consider the evil that lies behind writing sermons. The nearest you can come to a writer of fiction who has been steeped in crime is in Benvenuto Cellini, whose marvelous autobiographical memoir certainly contains some fiction, though it is classed under the suspect department of History.

How many men actually have been saved from a criminal career by the miraculous influence of novels? Let who will deny, but at the age of six I myself was absolutely committed to the abandoned purpose of riding barebacked horses in a circus. Secretly, of course, because there were some vague speculations in the family concerning what seemed to be special adaptability to the work of preaching. Shortly after I gave that up to enlist in the Continental Army, under Gen. Francis Marion, and no other soldier slew more Britons. After discharge I at once volunteered in an Indiana regiment quartered in my native town in Kentucky, and beat

12 the snare drum at the head of that fine body of men for a long time. But the tendency was downward. For three months I was chief of a of robbers that ravaged the backyards of the vicinity. Successively I became a spy for Washington, an Indian fighter, a tragic actor.

With character seared, abandoned and dissolute in habit through and by the hearing and seeing and reading of history, there was but one desperate step left So I entered upon the career of a pirate in my ninth year. The Spanish Main, as no doubt you remember, was at that time upon an open common across the street from our house, and it was a hundred feet long, half as wide and would average two feet in depth. I have often since thanked Heaven that they filled up that pathless ocean in order to build an iron foundry upon the spot. Suppose they had excavated for a cellar! Why during the time that Capt. Kidd, Lafitte and I infested the coast thereabout, sailing three "low, black-hulled schooners with long rakish masts," I forced hundreds of merchant seamen to walk the plank—even helpless women and children. Unless the sharks devoured them, their bones are yet about three feet under the floor of that iron foundry. Under the lee of the Northernmost promontory, near a rock marked with peculiar crosses made by the point of the stiletto which I constantly carried in my red silk sash, I buried tons of plate, and doubloons, pieces of eight, pistoles, Louis d'ors, and galleons by the chest. At that time galleons somehow meant to me money pieces in use, though since then the name has been given to a species of boat. The rich brocades, Damascus and Indian stuffs, laces, mantles, shawls and finery were piled in riotous profusion in our cave where—let the whole truth be told if it must—I lived with a bold, black-eyed and coquettish Spanish girl, who loved me with ungovernable jealousy that occasionally led to bitter and terrible scenes of rage and despair. At last when I brought home a white and red English girl whose life I spared because she had begged me her knees by the memory of my sainted mother to spare her for her old father, who was waiting her coming, Joquita passed all bounds. I killed her—with a single knife thrust I remember. She was buried right on the spot where the Tilden and Hendricks flag pole afterwards stood in the campaign of 1876. It was with bitter melancholy that I fancied the red stripes on the flag had their color from the blood of the poor, foolish jealous girl below.

Ah, well—

Let us all own up—we men of above forty who aspire to respectability and do actually live orderly lives and achieve even the odor of sanctity—have we not been stained with murder?—aye worse! What man has

not his Bluebeard closet, full of early crimes and villainies? A certain boy in whom I take a particular interest, who goes to Sunday-school and whose life is outwardly proper—is he not now on week days a robber of great renown? A week ago, masked and armed, he held up his own father in a secluded corner of the library and relieved the old man of swag of

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a value beyond the dreams—not of avarice, but—of successful, respectable, modern speculation. He purposes to be a pirate whenever there is a convenient sheet of water near the house. God speed him. Better a pirate at six than at sixty.

Give them work to do and good novels to read and they will get over it. History breeds queer ideas in children. They read of military heroes, kings and statesmen who commit awful deeds and are yet monuments of public honor. What a sweet hero is Raleigh, who was a farmer of piracy; what a grand Admiral was Drake; what demi-gods the fighting Americans who murdered Indians for the crime of wanting their own! History hath charms to move an infant breast to savagery. Good strong novels are the best pabulum to nourish difference between virtue and vice.

Don't I know? I have felt the miracle and learned the difference so well that even now at an advanced age I can tell the difference and indulge in either. It was not a week after the killing of Joquita that I read the first novel of my life. It was "Scottish Chiefs." The dead bodies of ten thousand novels lie between me and that first one. I have not read it since. Ten Incas of Peru with ten rooms full of solid gold could not tempt me to read it again. Have I not a clear cinch on a delicious memory, compared with which gold is only Robinson Crusoe's "drug?" After a lapse of all these years the content of that one tremendous, noble chapter of heroic climax is as deeply burned into my memory as if it had been read yesterday.

A sister, old enough to receive "beaux" and addicted to the piano-forte accomplishment, was at that time practicing across the hall an instrumental composition, entitled, "La R`eve." Under the title, printed in very small letters, was the English translation; but I never thought to look at it. An elocutionist had shortly before recited Poe's Raven at a church entertainment, and that gloomy bird flapped its wings in my young emotional vicinity when the firelight threw vague "shadows on the floor." When the piece of music was spoken as "La R`eve," its sad cadences, suffering, of course, under practice, were instantly wedded in my mind to Mr. Poe's wonderful bird and for years it meant the "Raven" to me. How curious are childish impressions. Years afterward when I saw a copy of the music and read the translation, "The Dream" under the title, I felt a distinct shock of resentment as if the French language had been treacherous to my sacred ideas. Then there was the romantic name of "Ellerslie," which, notwithstanding considerable precocity in reading and spelling I carried off as "Elleressie" Yeas afterward when the actual syllables confronted me in a historical sketch of Wallace, the truth entered like a stab and I closed the book. O sacred first illusions of childhood, you are sweeter than a thousand year of fame! It is God's providence that hardens us to endure the throwing of them down to our eyes and strengthens us to keep their memory sweet in our hearts.

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It would be an affront then, not to assume that every reputable novel reader has read "Scottish Chiefs." If there is any descendant or any personal friend of that admirable lady, Miss Jane Porter, who may now be in pecuniary distress, let that descendant call upon me privately with

perfect confidence. There are obligations that a glacial evolutionary period can not lessen. I make no conditions but the simple proof of proper identity. I am not rich but I am grateful.

It was a Saturday evening when I became aware, as by prescience, that there hung over Sir William Wallace and Helen Mar some terrible shadow of fate. And the piano-forte across the hall played "La R`eve." My heart failed me and I closed the book. If you can't do that, my friend, then you waste your time trying to be a novel reader. You have not the true touch of genius for it. It is the miracle of eating your cake and having it, too. It must have been the unconscious moving of novel reading genius in me. For I forgot, as clearly as if it were not a possibility, that the next day was Sunday. And so hurried off, before time, to bed, to be alone with the burden on my heart.

"Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight—
Make me a child again just for tonight."

There are two or three novels I should love to take to bed as of yore—not to read, but to suffer over and to contemplate and to seek calmness and courage with which to face the inevitable. Could there be men base enough to do to death the noble Wallace? Or to break the heart of Helen Mar with grief? No argument could remove the presentiment, but facing the matter gave courage. "Let tomorrow answer," I thought, as the piano-forte in the next room played "La R`eve." Then fell asleep.

And when I awoke next morning to the full knowledge that it was Sunday, I could have murdered the calendar. For Sunday was Dies Irae. After Sunday-school, at least. There is a certain amount of fun to be to extracted from Sunday-school. The remainder of those early Sundays was confined to reading the Bible or storybooks from the Sunday-school library—books, by the Lord Harry, that seem to be contrived especially to make out of healthy children life-long enemies of the church, and to bind hypocrites to the altar with hooks of steel. There was no whistling at all permitted; singing of hymns was encouraged; no "playing"—playing on Sunday was a distinct source of displeasure to Heaven! Are free-born men nine years of age to endure such tyranny with resignation? Ask the kids of today—and with one voice, as true men and free, they will answer you, "Nit!" In the dark days of my youth liberty was in chains, and so Sunday was passed in dreadful suspense as to what was doing in Scotland.

Monday night after supper I rejoined Sir William in his captivity and soon saw that my worst fears were to be realized. My father sat on the
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opposite side of the table reading politics; my mother was effecting the restoration of socks; my brother was engaged in unraveling mathematical tangles, and in the parlor across the hall my sister sat alone with her piano patiently debating "La R`eve." Under these circumstances I encountered the first great miracle of intellectual emotion in the chapter describing the execution of William Wallace on Tower Hill. No other incident of life has left upon me such a profound impression. It was as if I had sprung at one bound into the arena of heroism. I remember it all. How Wallace delivered himself of theological and Christian precepts to Helen Mar after which they both knelt before the officiating priest. That she thought or said, "My life will expire with yours!" It was the keynote of death and life devotion. It was worthy to usher Wallace up the scaffold steps where he stood with his hands bound, "his noble head uncovered." There was much Christian edification, but the presence of such a hero as he with "noble Head uncovered" would

enable any man nine years old with a spark of honor and sympathy in him to endure agonizing amounts of edification. Then suddenly there was a frightful shudder in my heart. The hangman approached with the rope, and Helen Mar, with a shriek, threw herself upon Wallace's breast. Then the great moment. If I live a thousand years these lines will always be with me: "Wallace, with a mighty strength, burst the bonds asunder that confined his arms and clasped her to his heart!"

In reading some critical or pretended text books on construction since that time I came across this sentence used to illustrate tautology. It was pointed out that the bonds couldn't be "burst" without necessarily being asunder. The confoundedest outrages in this world are the capers that precisionists cut upon the bodies of the noble dead. And with impunity too. Think of a village surveyor measuring the forest of Arden to discover the exact acreage! Or a horse-doctor elevating his eye-brow with a contemptuous smile and turning away, as from an innocent, when you speak of the wings of that fine horse, Pegasus! Any idiot knows that bonds couldn't be burst without being burst asunder. But, let the impregnable Jackass think—what would become of the noble rhythm and the majestic roll of sound? Shakespeare was an ignorant dunce also when he characterized the ingratitude that involves the principle of public honor as "the unkindest cut of all." Every school child knows that it is ungrammatical; but only those who have any sense learn after awhile the esoteric secret that it sometimes requires a tragedy of language to provide fitting sacrifice to the manes of despair. There never was yet a man of genius who wrote grammatically and under the scourge of rhetorical rules. Anthony Trollope is a most perfect example of the exact correctness that sterilizes in its own immaculate chastity. Thackeray would knock a qualifying adverb across the street, or thrust it under your nose to make room for the vivid force of an idea. Trollope would give the idea a decent funeral for the sake of having his adverb appear at the grave above reproach from grammatical gossip. Whenever I have risen from the splendid psychological perspective of old Job, the

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solemn introspective howls of Ecclesiasticus and the generous living philosophy of Shakespeare it has always been with the desire—of course it is undignified, but it is human—to go and get an English grammar for the pleasure of spitting upon it. Let us be honest. I understand everything about grammar except what it means; but if you will give me the living substance and the proper spirit any gentleman who desires the grammatical rules may have them, and be hanged to him! And, while it may appear presumptuous, I can conscientiously say that it will not be agreeable to me to settle down in heaven with a class of persons who demand the rules of grammar for the intellectual reason that corresponds to the call for crutches by one-legged men.

If the foregoing appear ill-tempered pray forget it. Remember rather that I have sought to leave my friend Sir William Wallace, holding Helen Mar on his breast as long as possible. And yet, I also loved her! Can human nature go farther than that?

"Helen," he said to her, "life's cord is cut by God's own hand." He stooped, he fell, and the fall shook the scaffold. Helen—that glorified heroine—raised his head to her lap. The noble Earl of Gloucester stepped forward, took the head in his hands.

"There," he cried in a burst of grief, letting it fall again upon the insensible bosom of Helen, "there broke the noblest heart that ever beat in the breast of man!"

That page or two of description I read with difficulty and agony through

blinding tears, and when Gloucester spoke his splendid eulogy my head fell on the table and I broke into such wild sobbing that the little family sprang up in astonishment. I could not explain until my mother, having led me to my room, succeeded in soothing me into calmness and I told her the cause of it. And she saw me to bed with sympathetic caresses and, after she left, it all broke out afresh and I cried myself to sleep in utter desolation and wretchedness. Of course the matter got out and my father began the book. He was sixty years old, not an indiscriminate reader, but a man of kind and boyish heart. I felt a sort of fascinated curiosity to watch him when he reached the chapter that had broken me. And, as if it were yesterday, I can see him under the lamplight compressing his lips, or puffing like a smoker through them, taking off his spectacles, and blowing his nose with great ceremony and carelessly allowing the handkerchief to reach his eyes. Then another paragraph and he would complain of the glasses and wipe them carefully, also his eyes, and replace the spectacles. But he never looked at me, and when he suddenly banged the lids together and, turning away, sat staring into the fire with his head bent forward, making unconcealed use of the handkerchief, I felt a sudden sympathy for him and sneaked out. He would have made a great novel reader if he had had the heart. But he couldn't stand sorrow and pain. The novel reader must have a heart

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for every fate. For a week or more I read that great chapter and its approaches over and over, weeping less and less, until I had worn out that first grief, and could look with dry eyes upon my dead. And never since have I dared to return to it. Let who will speak freely in other tones of "Scottish Chiefs"—opinions are sacred liberties—but as for me I know it changed my career from one of ruthless piracy to better purposes, and certain boys of my private acquaintance are introduced to Miss Jane Porter as soon as they show similar bent.

IV.

THE FIRST NOVEL TO READ CONTAINING SOME SCANDALOUS REMARKS ABOUT "ROBINSON CRUSOE"

The very best First-Novel-To-Read in all fiction is "Robinson Crusoe." There is no dogmatism in the declaration; it is the announcement of a fact as well ascertained as the accuracy of the multiplication table. It is one of the delights of novel reading that you may have any opinion you please and fire it off with confidence, without gainsay. Those who differ with you merely have another opinion, which is not sacred and cannot be proved any more than yours. All of the elements of supreme test of imaginative interest are in "Robinson Crusoe." Love is absent, but that is not a test; love appeals to persons who cannot read or write—it is universal, as hunger and thirst.

The book-reading boy is easily discovered; you always catch him reading books. But the novel-reading boy has a system of his own, a sort of instinctive way of getting the greatest excitement out of the story, the very best run for his money. This sort of boy soon learns to sit with his feet drawn up on the upper rung of a chair, so that from the knees to the thighs there is a gentle declivity of about thirty degrees; the knees are nicely separated that the book may lie on them without holding. That involves one of the most cunning of psychological secrets; because, if the boy is not a novel reader, he does not want the book to lie open, since every time it closes he gains just that much relief in finding the place again. The novel-reading boy knows the trick of immortal wisdom; he can go through the old book cases and pick the

treasures of novels by the way they lie open; if he gets hold of a new or especially fine edition of his father's he need not be told to wrench it open in the middle and break the back of the binding—he does it instinctively.

There are other symptoms of the born novel reader to be observed in him.

If he reads at night he is careful to so place his chair that the light will fall on the page from a direction that will ultimately ruin the eyes—but it does not interfere with the light. He humps himself over the open volume and begins to display that unerring curvilinearity of the spine that compels his mother to study braces and to fear that he

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will develop consumption. Yet you can study the world's health records and never find a line to prove that any man with "occupation or profession—novel reading" is recorded as dying of consumption. The humped-over attitude promotes compression of the lungs, telescoping of the diaphragm, atrophy of the abdominal abracadabra and other things (see *Physiological Slush*, p. 179, et seq.); but—it—never—hurts—the—boy!

To a novel reading boy the position is one of instinct, like that of the bicycle racer. His eyes are strained, his nerves and muscles at tension—everything ready for excitement—and the book, lying open, leaves his hands perfectly free to drum on the sides of the chair, slap his legs and knees, fumble in his pockets or even scratch his head as emotion or interest demand. Does anybody deny that the highest proof of special genius is the possession of the instinct to adapt itself to the matter in hand? Nothing more need be said.

Now, if you will observe carefully such a boy when he comes to a certain point in "Robinson Crusoe" you may recognize the stroke of fate in his destiny. If he's the right sort, he will read gayly along; he drums, he slaps himself, he beats his breast, he scratches his head. Suddenly there will come the shock. He is reading rapidly and gloriously.

He finds his knife in his pocket, as usual, and puts it back; the top-string is there; he drums the devil's tattoo, he wets his finger and smears the margin of the page as he whirls it over and then—he finds—"The—Print—of—a—Man's—Naked—Foot—on—the—Shore!!!"

Oh, Crackey! At this tremendous moment the novel reader who has genius drums no more. His hands have seized the upper edges of the muslin lids, he presses the lower edges against his stomach, his back takes an added intensity of hump, his eyes bulge, his heart thumps—he is landed—landed!

Terror, surprise, sympathy, hope, skepticism, doubt—come all ye trooping emotions to threaten or console; but an end has come to fairy stories and wonder tales—Master Studios is in the awful presence of Human Nature.

For many years I have believed that that Print—of—a—Man's—Naked—Foot was set in italic type in all editions of "Robinson Crusoe." But a patient search of many editions has convinced me that I must have been mistaken.

The passage comes sneaking along in the midst of a paragraph in common Roman letters and by the living jingo! you discover it just as Mr.

Crusoe discovered the footprint itself !

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No story ever written exhibits so profoundly either the perfect design of supreme genius or the curious accidental result of slovenly carelessness in a hack-writer. This is not said in any critical spirit, because, Robinson Crusoe, in one sense, is above criticism, and in

another it permits the freest analysis without suffering in the estimation of any reader.

But for Robinson Crusoe, De Foe would never have ranked above the level of his time. It is customary for critics to speak in awe of the "Journal of the Plague" and it is gravely recited that that book deceived the great Dr. Meade. Dr. Meade must have been a poor doctor if De Foe's accuracy of description of the symptoms and effects of disease is not vastly superior to the detail he supplies as a sailor and solitaire upon a desert island. I have never been able to finish the "Journal."

The only books in which his descriptions smack of reality are "Moll Flanders" and "Roxana," which will barely stand reading these days. In what may be called its literary manner, Robinson Crusoe is entirely like the others. It convinces you by its own conviction of sincerity. It is simple, wandering yet direct; there is no making of "points" or moving to climaxes. De Foe did unquestionably possess the capacity to put into his story the appearance of sincerity that persuades belief at a glance. In that much he had the spark of genius; yet that same case has not availed to make the "Journal" of the Plague anything more than a curious and laborious conceit, while Robinson Crusoe stands among the first books of the world—a marvelous gleam of living interest, inextinguishably fresh and heartening to the imagination of every reader who has sensibility two removes above a toad.

The question arises, then, is "Robinson Crusoe" the calculated triumph of deliberate genius, or the accidental stroke of a hack who fell upon a golden suggestion in the account of Alexander Selkirk and increased its value ten thousand fold by an unintentional but rather perfect marshaling of incidents in order, and by a slovenly ignorance of character treatment that enhanced the interest to perfect intensity?

This question may be discussed without undervaluing the book, the extraordinary merit of which is shown in the fact that, while its idea has been paraphrased, it has never been equalled. The "Swiss Family Robinson," the "Schonberg-Cotta Family" for children are full of merit and far better and more carefully written, but there are only the desert island and the ingenious shifts introduced. Charles Reade in "Hard Cash," Mr. Mallock in his "Nineteenth Century Romance," Clark Russel in "Marooned," and Mayne Reid, besides others, have used the same theater.

But only in that one great book is the theater used to display the simple, yearning, natural, resolute, yet doubting, soul and heart of man in profound solitude, awaiting in armed terror, but not without purpose, the unknown and masked intentions of nature and savagery. It seems to me—and I have been tied to Crusoe's chariot wheels for a dozen readings, I suppose—that it is the pressing in upon your emotions of

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the immensity of the great castaway's solitude, in which he appears like some tremendous Job of abandonment, fighting an unseen world, which is the innate note of its power.

The very moment Friday becomes a loyal subject, the suspense relaxes into pleased interest, and after Friday's funny father and the Spaniard and others appear it becomes a common book. As for the second part of the adventures I do not believe any matured man ever read it a second time unless for curious or literary purposes. If he did he must be one of that curious but simple family that have read the second part of "Faust," "Paradise Regained," and the "Odyssey," and who now peruse "Clarissa Harlowe" and go carefully over the catalogue of ships in the "Iliad" as a preparation for enjoying the excitements of the city directory.

Every particle of greatness in "Robinson Crusoe" is compressed within two hundred pages, the other four hundred being about as mediocre trash as you could purchase anywhere between cloth lids.

It is interesting to apply subjective analysis to Robinson Crusoe. The book in its very greatness has turned more critical swans into geese than almost any other. They have praised the marvelous ingenuity with which De Foe described how the castaway overcame single-handed, the deprivations of all civilized conveniences; they have marveled at the simple method in which all his labors are marshaled so as to render his conversion of the island into a home the type of industrial and even of social progress and theory; they have rhapsodized over the perfection of De Foe's style as a model of literary strength and artistic verisemblance. Only a short time ago a mighty critic of a great London paper said seriously that "Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver appeal infinitely more to the literary reader than to the boy, who does not want a classic but a book written by a contemporary." What an extraordinary boy that must be! It is probable that few boys care for Gulliver beyond his adventures in Lilliput and Brobdignag, but they devour that much, together with Robinson Crusoe, with just as much avidity now as they did a century ago. Your clear-headed, healthy boy is the first best critic of what constitutes the very liver and lights of a novel. Nothing but the primitive problems of courage meeting peril, virtue meeting vice, love, hatred, ambition for power and glory, will go down with him. The grown man is more capable of dealing with social subtleties and the problems of conscience, but those sorts of books do not last unless they have also "action-action-action."

Will the New Zealander, sitting amidst the prophetic ruins of St. Paul's, invite his soul reading Robert Elsmere? Of course you can't say what a New Zealander of that period might actually do; but what would
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you think of him if you caught him at it? The greatest stories of the world are the Bible stories, and I never saw a boy-intractable of acquiring the Sunday-school habit though he may have been—who wouldn't lay his savage head on his paws and quietly listen to the good old tales of wonder out of that book of treasures.

So let us look into the interior of our faithful old friend, Robinson Crusoe, and examine his composition as a literary whole. From the moment that Crusoe is washed ashore on the island until after the release of Friday's father and the Spaniard from the hands of the cannibals, there is no book in print, perhaps, that can surpass it in interest and the strained impression it makes upon the unsophisticated mind. It is all comprised in about 200 pages, but to a boy to whom the world is a theater of crowded action, to whom everything seems to have come ready-made, to whom the necessity of obedience and accommodation to others has been conveyed by constant friction—here he finds himself for the first time face to face with the problem of solitude. He can appreciate the danger from wild animals, genii, ghosts, battles, sieges and sudden death, but in no other book before, did he ever come upon a human being left solitary, with all these possible dangers to face. The voyages on the raft, the house-building, contriving, fearing, praying, arguing—all these are full of plaintive pathos and yet of encouragement. He witnesses despair turned into comfortable resignation as the result of industry. It has required about twelve years. Virtue is apparently fattening upon its own reward, when—Smash! Bang!—our young reader runs upon "the-print-of-a-man's-naked-foot!" and security and happiness, like startled birds, are flown forever. For twelve more

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