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ON READING

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ON READING

ON READING

AN ESSAY

BY
GEORGE BRANDES

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ON READING

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A FEW years ago several European newspapers offered prizes for a list of the best one hundred books for a first-class library. The answers poured in: the Bible and "Robinson Crusoe," Homer and Horace, Dante and Shakespeare, Holberg and Oehlenschläger, Goethe and Mickiewitz, Racine and Pascal, Arany and Petöfi, Cervantes and Calderon, Björnson and Ibsen, Tegner and Runeberg, — each list characteristic of the country and the individual taste of the correspondent.

It is childish to suppose that a hundred books can be named as those which are the best for each and every one.

The simplest experience of the world proves that a work of great excellence may deeply move one person, while it leaves another untouched; and that a book which has influenced one strongly in one's youth may lose such influence over one's later years. There is practically nothing that every man can read at every time.

This fact is not particularly evident, of course, for the simple reason that nowadays very few people can be said to read at all, or enjoy reading, or get any good out of it. Out of a hundred persons able to read, ninety generally read nothing but newspapers, — a species of reading which demands no exertion. Most people, for that matter, read without any particular attentiveness. Perhaps they select reading-matter which does not deserve any particular attention. What wonder, then, that they forget what they read? Everyone will recall such remarks as the following: "There 's no use talking to me about this book or that book, — I must have read it, I suppose, some years ago; but I have the unfortunate faculty of forgetting everything I read." And many people, after all, are not accustomed to understand fully. They are like young people reading books in foreign languages, who neglect to refer to the dictionary for words they do not understand; they infer them from the sense, — so they say; that is, they understand half, and are content with that.

In the case of works, the nature of which is not intended to be grasped by the intellect, as, for example, in lyric poetry, readers generally relinquish beforehand all idea of understanding exactly what the author means. An acquaintance of mine, in a company of ladies, once tried the experiment of reading aloud Goethe's *The God and the Bayadere,* beginning each verse with the last line, and reading upwards. The rhymes fell without intermission, all the melody of the verses was retained — and every one was charmed with the following:

"Then by her with grace is the nosegay bestowed.
Well skilled in its mazes the sight to entrance,
The cymbal she hastens to play for the dance,
And this house is love's abode."

Reflecting a little upon this and similar phenomena, one readily finds oneself raising the questions:

Why should we read?

What should we read?

How should we read?

It is neither superfluous nor idle to raise these questions. I had accepted invitations several times to the home of a well-to-do family enjoying a good position abroad, — a household which took a certain standing in the artistic life of a capital city, — when it struck me one day that I had never seen any book-case or book-shelves in the house. In reply to my query, I was told that they had no book-case, nor any books, except the two or three that lay on the sitting-room table. "But you read, or have read a good deal?" I asked. "Oh, yes," was the answer; "we travel a good deal, as you know, and in the course of the year we buy a great many books; but we always leave them behind in the net," — meaning the nets of the railway carriages. And, by way of explanation: "You see, one never reads a book more than once."

I should have caused great astonishment, I suppose, had I replied that in the domain of reading — if in no other — it is regarded as a changeless rule that one time is no time at all, that a man who restricts himself to one reading of a good book knows little about it. The books I value I have frequently read more than ten times; indeed, in some cases I could not possibly say how many times. One does not really know a book until one knows it almost by heart.

It is a good thing, too, if one has the means, to own one's books. There are people who do not own any books, although they have the means. I was once invited, abroad, to the house of a certain Maecenas, — a man whose art collections are worth considerably more than a million, — and when I had viewed his pictures, I said: "Now I should like to see the books. Where are they?" He replied, somewhat testily: "I do not collect books." He had none.

There are people who are content, as to books, with the provision afforded them by circulating libraries, — a sorry method at the best. It is a sure sign of failing culture and poor taste when at every watering-place in a great country expensively dressed women are invariably seen each with a greasy novel from a circulating library in her hand. These ladies, who would be ashamed to borrow a dress, or wear second-hand clothes, do not hesitate to economize in book-buying. As a result, they read one novel after another, and the last supplants all knowledge of those that have gone before.

The man who replied "I do not collect books," saw no necessity for reading. He belonged to the wealthy bourgeois class, and men of that class rarely have the time and the concentration for reading anything but newspapers. Outside the ranks of scholars, a strong and passionate love for reading is felt, in the main, only by those who have neither the time nor the means for it, — the lower middle classes, artisans, and workmen. Among these latter there is still to be found that thirst for education which distinguished the wealthy bourgeois classes a hundred years ago, though it was so quickly slaked.

Why should we read? is therefore the question that requires an answer first.

I do not overestimate the knowledge that can be acquired through reading. In many cases it is necessarily only a poor apology for direct knowledge of the world and of life. It is of more use to travel widely than to read detailed and comprehensive descriptions of travels. You learn to know men better by observing them in real life than by investigating them in books. I will go still further, and say that sculptures, paintings, and drawings, when they are the work of the greatest artists, are profoundly more instructive than the great majority of books. Michael Angelo, Titian, Velasquez, Rembrandt, have taught me more concerning humanity than whole libraries of books.

Books can at best present only a theory. A doctor must study his case; he cannot obtain all his knowledge by reading, and neither can books teach us anything unless we learn also from life. If we have no knowledge of mankind, we cannot enjoy even a novel. We are not in a position to judge whether it gives a true or a false picture of things as they are.

As proof of this we need only recall the many foolish remarks with which in the course of the year one hears good books dismissed. "Nobody would feel or act like that," is the off-hand verdict of one person or another who has known only a small circle of people, and never understood anything of what was going on in the minds of those around him. Such persons term a book poor and unreal because it happens to be outside the reality with which they themselves happen to be acquainted, — a reality which is to actual reality what a duck-pond is to the ocean.

We are not to believe, then, that we can attain to any wisdom simply by devouring books. Many qualifications are necessary merely to understand and make one's own the fraction of wisdom that a good book may contain, — qualifications derived from life.

On the other hand, it is also true that books have certain advantages which men have not.

They set thoughts in motion, — which men seldom do. They are silent when questions are not asked of them; men are seldom so discreet. Recall how often you have received visits from intrusive, troublesome people! Yet the seven thousand or eight thousand volumes in my study have never been a trouble to me, often a pleasure. And books are seldom so inane as people. One feels frequently like applying to the mass of humanity those words of Goethe: "If they were books, I would not read them."

If I may be permitted an exceedingly trite observation, we ought also to read so as to add to our own experience those of other men, greater and more competent than ourselves. We ought to read because in science the work and investigation of centuries is presented to us in a clear, condensed form, and because in literature we meet with a peculiar beauty and with beauty-loving personalities that we can learn to know in no other way. Reading has power to make us keener and more susceptible to the values of things.

Furthermore, if reading affords no more than innocent entertainment, it is worth while in the wearisomeness and monotonous exertion of daily life. Reading for pure amusement is by no means to be despised, — so long as it does indeed amuse.

Many will add that we should read to become better men and women, and demand in consequence that stress should be laid upon exhortatory books, at the expense of the rest of literature. Literature must be moral, they will say, and operate morally; books must be sermons. Far be it from me to deny that one may grow better through reading; but whether one does or does not depends chiefly upon *how* one reads, and we have not yet arrived at that question. As a rule we may say that nothing in the world improves one less than sermonizing books and conversations; nothing is more wearisome, quite apart from the fact that nothing is more inartistic. Just as you cannot train a child by constant scolding, neither can you develop character by everlasting preaching. And the moralizing book is no example. Everyone knows the precepts he was taught in childhood,— not to act selfishly, or think basely; not to lie, or cheat, or injure, or kill. We all know these precepts so well that they make no impression upon us, even when we see them illustrated in poetical compositions. We do not demand of an author that he should work to make us better; that would be laying too heavy a burden upon him. All that we can demand of him is that he work conscientiously, and that he have it in him to teach us something.

Also, we can avoid the books that would debase us. But that leads to our second question:

What should we read?

What *do* we read? Newspapers. No one will deny that newspaper reading has become a necessity to us all, and that the papers rapidly, and (occasionally) conscientiously, impart knowledge, though, it is true, of a very scattered kind. Day after day they teach us all sorts of interesting things and point the way to much other reading. No sooner are we out of bed in the morning than we must have our newspaper whirling us round through Europe, Africa, Asia, and America. An editor might say, as the ditty has it, "I whirl my hens six or seven times round." And at the same time he fills his readers up with various items of the day's news; often we get the interesting information that Mr. Jensen, the broker, is stopping in the country at Ordrup; or that Mr. Larsen, the painter, is spending the summer in the district of Horn.

In reading the papers we yield to the desire to see our own opinions, sometimes little else than prejudices instilled into us by others, expressed and advocated in print better than we ourselves could ever do. The foolish newspapers' foolish readers expect, moreover, to be crammed with all sorts of private scandal, partly that they may see those politicians or literary men whose views are opposed to theirs, and so unpopular, properly ground down. This last is a peculiarly Danish relaxation.

The acknowledged good-nature of the Danish people is counterbalanced by an extraordinarily pronounced petty malice. As other nations enjoy bull-fights, cock-fights, and boxers' bleeding noses, so the Danish public take delight in every sort of private persecution and private scandal published in their press.

There are only two things one would wish for newspaper readers: — that they might read their favorite papers with some exercise of the faculty of criticism; and be not so satisfied with newspaper reading as to incapacitate them for any other.

At the beginning of this article I set about the task of controverting the opinion that any definite number of books could be designated as the best books for every one.

There is one Book of Books that is generally regarded as the most suitable of all for general and constant reading, *the* very best book, — the Bible. Few books, however, prove so conclusively as this that the bulk of mankind cannot read at all. The so-called Old Testament comprises, as is well known, all that is left to us of the ancient Hebrew literature of a period of eight hundred years, together with some few books in Greek. It includes writings of the most various value and the most various origin, which have come down to us with texts comparatively recently edited, often corrupt and further marred by endless copyings; — writings ascribed as a rule to men who never wrote them, nearly all of them difficult to understand, and demanding extensive historical knowledge in order to be read with the smallest degree of profit.

Certain of the books of the Old Testament, like the collection which bears the name of Isaiah, contain some of the sublimest extant poetry of antiquity,—a witness to the purest craving for righteousness, the highest religious development to be found on earth at that time, seven hundred and fifty or five hundred years before our era. Others, as for example the Chronicles, are of less value, and are not strictly accurate in their historical recitals.

There is much evidence that such reading confuses men's minds.

Yet if the acknowledged "best" book cannot be called good for every one, then how much less the classics! In the majority of well-to-do homes the so-called classical works are to be found in every book-case. But it is surprisingly true that they stand there principally for show, are seldom or never read, and give but little pleasure when they are read, because it is a mere chance whether they are understood. The classical writers wrote for earlier generations, and their works contain as a rule a good deal that is alien to the generations that have arisen after them. For this reason it is perhaps best to begin with books written for those now living. Young people will quite understand these, and the way will be prepared for the great writers of the past. Again, the classics not infrequently stand upon people's book-shelves as involuntary witnesses to their owner's lack of individuality. Often the purchaser has had no personal affection for them, and has them only because his social position requires it. It is true that in this way he often comes to have good books. But the credit of the selection is only in a very small measure his own; and the good books are generally of the past, rarely of the present.

The average man's mind is inimical to new thoughts and new forms. Geniuses in their lifetime — if they do not live to be very old — always have the majority against them. It is not at all surprising that they live and die unrecognized; the amazing thing is that they should occasionally be recognized. When they are, the recognition is partly due to the fact that what is truly excellent operates with a wonderfully compelling force. The good, in the mass, has a corrosive action upon the mediocre; it eats its way through. A few — connoisseurs, judges of art — proclaim the worth of the good books so loud and long that they frighten the snobbish into the fear of being called stupid if they scoff any longer; and altogether act in a regularly hypnotic manner on the popular mind, so that people believe they think the good, good, and in time familiarize themselves with the idea of thinking so.

It is of course right to aim at a common, solid educational basis, to put into a child's hands adventures, — "Robinson Crusoe," the "Odyssey," — to let a boy or a girl read "Walter Scott," and a young man make acquaintance with "Falstaff" and "Don Quixote." Young people of both sexes soon learn to know, too, what is accessible to them of Shakespeare and Goethe. In the same way it would be unnatural to let Danish boys or girls grow up without some knowledge of the chief writers of their own country. The man or woman who does not know "Jeppe paa Bjerget" and "Erasmus Montanus" is outside his fellow-countrymen's pale of culture.

It is, however, a sign that individuality is lacking when people's favorite authors and favorite books lie so seldom off the beaten track. Occasionally the reverse is true. The English historian, Gibbon, for instance, is no longer generally read. Yet I know a German painter and poet who has read with enjoyment, not once, but many times, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." Gibbon's wide vision, great intellectual freedom, and extraordinary descriptive power give his work lasting value, and to this reader Gibbon is the master of historical writing.

In Denmark, Christian Zahrtmann, the painter, has read Leonora Christina's "Jammersminde" for years, over and over again, with such absorption that the book has grown to be part of him, inspiring long series of original and important pictures. We ought to read what is of most value to us, as he has read that book. There is unfortunately little of such forcible originality and singularity amongst us.

But, you will ask, how am I to find the good books that are to appeal directly to me? It would be as hard to indicate an infallible way of finding such books as to lay down rules for making the acquaintance of the pleasantest and most profitable people one could know. All that can be done is to utter warnings against methods which do not lead in the right direction.

There are people who do not think it necessary to read books themselves, because they can get information in other ways. Many prefer a general survey of things, believing they see most when they see most widely, and seize eagerly on that compendious class of books which begin with the creation of the world and end with our own times, — the so-called literary histories of the world.

This is exactly the sort of book that does most harm. No one man is capable of writing such a book, and as such books go they are far more likely to stupefy than to instruct. The author of such a literary history of the world speaks familiarly of writings in half a hundred languages, with which it is impossible that he can have more than a slight acquaintance. If he had begun to read before he was born, and had never done anything else, — never enjoyed life, never slept, never eaten or drunk, — but only read, until he published his book, he would not have had time to read more than a very small portion of the books he mentions and discusses. He can only know most imperfectly himself that which he strives to impart to others, and his teaching will be imperfect, like his knowledge.

A book which is really to instruct must embrace either a single country, or a short, definite period. One might almost say the shorter the period, the better. Comparative narrowness of subject does not make a narrow book. Things that are great and comprehensive are produced only by greatness of treatment, by the author's comprehensive vision, not by his endeavor to cover an immense field. The infinite in itself is not immensely much; frequently it is best revealed by symbolic treatment of some significant detail. A naturalist can discuss an insect in such a manner as to reveal an insight into the universe. In the same way, the great writer will always treat his subject symbolically. Even when he is writing about a short period or an individual, through his description of the subject, his explanation of the subject, and his criticism of the subject — there are always these three parts in a piece of writing — he will reveal the laws of all progress and of all intellectual activity.

Eschew, therefore, immense general surveys! Replace them by an encyclopædia! An encyclopædia does not pretend to be individual. It pretends to no more than dry information, preferably correct, about books and men.

There is nowadays a superstition in favor of so-called general education, — a phrase of which I confess

I am a little afraid. If we read to obtain a general education, our reading easily becomes so general that there is no education in it. We read now about whales, now about the Congo State, now about the drama, now about teeth, now about socialism in Bavaria, now about popular ballads in Servia, now about the Revolution of 1830, — a heterogeneous collection of facts, — and we consider ourselves generally educated.

Every one who can do anything, can do something in particular. From the particular, windows open out into the general. There are far fewer roads that lead from purely general to particular kinds of knowledge. So if the question were asked, What should we read? I should reply, Better far read ten books about one thing or about one man than a hundred books about a hundred different things!

Suppose one desired to learn something about English parliamentary proceedings; would there be any sense in taking up "Hansard," — the collected stenographic reports of proceedings in Parliament, — and trying to read through some decades or more of them? The man who did so would almost certainly go mad.

On the other hand I was very much interested at one time in the English politician and novelist Lord Beaconsfield; at the outset, in that particular man only. I began by reading what he had written in the way of novels and tales, and afterwards followed up the history of his public life. I thus came also to his speeches in Parliament. And as my interest had a centre, all these speeches about subjects that would not otherwise have engaged my attention enthralled me, and not Beaconsfield's speeches only, but all the speeches made by his colleagues, and especially by his enemies and opponents. He had enemies in plenty, each with his own individuality, who interested me in a certain degree because the man with whom they quarrelled interested me greatly; and in this way a considerable period of English political history that would otherwise have been rather out of my way became exceedingly attractive to me.

Therefore my advice is, as soon as a person or a thing interests you as a reader, seize it, absorb yourself in it. You will learn a thousand times more by doing that than by absorbing yourself in a thousand things and people. The object widens before your gaze, and gradually expands to a whole horizon. Never begin with the horizon, or you will understand nothing of what lies between.

After all, the real importance is not in the book but in the way in which it is read. I do not, of course, mean to say there are not numbers of poor books it is a waste of time to have anything to do with. People warn, and justly, against dangerous books, and occasionally the books called dangerous really are so. But these dangerous books are not only those which speculate in the youthful reader's sensual impulses, or appeal to his idleness or frivolity, but those also that represent base and low things as admirable, or disseminate prejudices, and throw a hateful light on liberal-mindedness, or the pursuit of freedom.

Useful or baneful, dangerous or safe, we are dealing with relative conceptions. Books which give a childish, and thus an erroneous picture of human nature, — such, for instance, as Ingermann's historical novels, — may possibly be placed without any great danger in the hands of children of from ten to twelve years of age; older children they may easily harm. Generally speaking, books which contain no nutritive matter for grown-up people may very well contain aliment and entertainment for children. On the other hand, numbers of books written with no objectionable intention describe circumstances, vices, and conflicts between passions and duties which it would be in the highest degree unwise to place in the hands of undeveloped readers, even though this does not in any way lessen their value or make them less appropriate reading for those whose minds are more mature and whose opinions are fixed.

Next to the dangerous books are the wearisome books. It is a sorry superstition that leads people involuntarily to cherish a certain respect for earnestness and erudition that weary them. Wearisome books discourage people from acquiring knowledge.

Histories, for example, are often frightfully wearisome; but how many patient people keep on reading them because they regard it as a sort of duty! Do not waste your time and energy over what is dry as dust, unless, as a specialist, you are seeking for information. History is, and ought to be, the most interesting of all subjects. To my mind it is far more interesting to read about real men and women than about fictitious ones, even if the latter have been drawn from life.

Historians sometimes take too little pains, and describe men merely from the outside, without having sought first to acquire the intimate personal sort of knowledge that enables them to understand their hero's character and motives.

I was sitting one evening in a German University town by the side of a little Professor of History, when he informed me that he was at work on a book about Bothwell, the wild Scottish Earl, Mary Stuart's lover, Darnley's murderer. I exclaimed involuntarily, with a glance at him: "It must be very difficult for you (I meant: for *you*) to enter into his feelings." "There is not the slightest occasion," he answered. "I have all the documents." After a score of years I still remember this reply, it made so deep an impression upon me. The documents were there, but not the breath of life, none of the individuality of the author.

Read, by way of contrast, such books as Carlyle's "Cromwell" and the first volume of his "Frederick the Great," or Michelet's "History of France" and Mommsen's "Roman History." Here, on each page, the characters are alive, and seem to come forward to meet us.

The question, therefore, What should we read? brings us immediately to the companion question:

How should we read?

Young girls sometimes make use of the expression: "Reading books to read one's self." They prefer a book that presents some resemblance to their own circumstances and experiences. It is true that we can never understand except through ourselves. Yet, when we want to understand a book, it should not be our aim to discover ourselves in that book, but to grasp clearly the meaning which its author has sought to convey through the characters presented in it.

We reach through the book to the soul that created it. And when we have learned as much as this of the author, we often wish to read more of his works. We suspect that there is some connection running through the different things he has written, and by reading his works consecutively we arrive at a better understanding of him and them.

Take, for instance, Henrik Ibsen's tragedy, "Ghosts." This earnest and profound play was at first almost unanimously denounced as an immoral publication. Ibsen's next work, "An Enemy of the People," describes, as is well known, the ill-treatment received by a doctor in a little seaside town when he points out the fact that the baths for which the town is noted are contaminated. The town does not want such a report spread; it is not willing to incur the necessary expensive reparation, but elects instead to abuse the doctor, treating him as if he and not the water were the contaminating element. The play was an answer to the reception given to "Ghosts," and when we perceive this fact we read it in a new light. We ought, then, preferably to read so as to comprehend the connection between an author's books.

We ought to read, too, so as to grasp the connection between an author's own books and those of other writers who have influenced him, or on whom he himself exerts an influence. Pause a moment over

"An Enemy of the People," and recollect the stress laid in that play upon the majority who as a majority are almost always in the wrong, against the emancipated individual, in the right; recollect the concluding reply about the strength that comes from standing alone. If the reader, struck by the force and singularity of these thoughts, were to trace whether they had previously been enunciated in Scandinavian books, he would find them expressed with quite fundamental energy throughout the writings of Sören Kierkegaard, and he would discern a connection between Norwegian and Danish literature, and observe how an influence from one country was asserting itself in the other. Thus, by careful reading, we reach through a book to the man behind it, to the great intellectual cohesion in which he stands, and to the influence which he in his turn exerts.

Of course this mode of reading is not for every one. As a matter of fact only those who are critically inclined pursue it. On the other hand, every one can read in such a manner as to deduce the moral lesson contained in what he reads.

I said above that we are not to believe we can grow better by mere reading, that we are not to demand of an author that he improve us by moralizing. We ought nevertheless so to read that we appropriate from our reading the moral lesson that lies hidden behind it.

I will select as an instance of what

I mean, the siege and surrender of Soissons, on March 3, 1814.

After the battle of Leipzig, Napoleon's position was as follows: He had from sixty to seventy thousand men under arms, — exhausted, broken-down troops, the majority of them mere children. Opposed to them were three hundred thousand men,—hardy and victorious soldiers. His generals were marching into France in disorder. What did Napoleon do? He hastened wherever the danger was greatest, reassured his troops, hurled them against the invading enemy, won a victory at Brienne, at La Rothière, — one to four, sometimes one to five. He dared not assume the offensive against such superior numbers, but, like a beast of prey, crouching ready to spring, he awaited some favorable chance, some mistake, which he was convinced the enemy would yet commit.

The mistake was made; Blücher and Schwarzenberg advanced separately. Napoleon flung himself upon Blücher, defeated him four days in succession, next fell upon Schwarzenberg, put him to flight, rejected offers of peace because the enemy would not concede France her natural boundaries, and hastened after Blücher again, to crush him completely and re-establish his own power.

Then suddenly everything changed. The little fortress of Soissons, which prevented Blücher and Schwarzenberg from combining their forces afresh, surrendered at the decisive moment. "Blücher's defeat," says Thiers, "was as certain as anything in a war can be. For the first time in this campaign not only the strategic, but also the numerical superiority, was on Napoleon's side. . . . What was it that could thus overthrow circumstances and fortune? A weak man, — one who without being either a traitor or a coward, or even a poor officer, allowed himself to be terrified by the enemy's threats. Thus was consummated the most baleful event in our history, next to that which occurred the following year between Wavre and Waterloo."

Read the story in the best modern presentment of it, — Henri Houssaye's book, "1814."

The fortress of Soissons had always been regarded as an important strategic point. But before 1814 no one had thought of putting it in a state of defence. Who would think of an invasion of France! The outworks were in ruins. Repairs were set on foot, and the command given over to Governor-General Moreau, — no relation of the celebrated Moreau. The garrison consisted of a handful of men, — seven hundred Poles, broken-hearted because they saw their country's cause lost, but nevertheless unswervingly attached to Napoleon, one hundred and forty gunners of the Old Guard, and eighty cavalry. The place was equipped with twenty light cannon.

There were therefore in all between nine hundred and one thousand men. Outside the fortress stood fifty thousand men, — the Russians under Winzingenrode, the Prussians under Blücher, and an artillery corps with forty heavy cannon. The cannonade began on March 2, at 11 o'clock in the morning. By 12 o'clock the gun-carriages had been shot away from several of the fortress cannon, and a number of the men disabled. At 3 o'clock the Russian column made an assault. It was repulsed by three hundred Poles under Colonel Koszynski. That day the little garrison had twenty-three killed and one hundred and twenty-three wounded.

In the meantime the two allied generals could hear a steady cannonade in the direction of Quercq, and were growing uneasy. After twelve hours' bombardment they had still been unable to make a breach. It might possibly require twelve or even thirty-six hours yet, and they had not the time to spare. They were only a day's march in front of Napoleon, and he was following at their heels.

Blücher sent Captain Mertens to parley. Moreau, when he found that Mertens had come to talk of the surrender of the fortress, broke off the discussion; yet, instead of dismissing the captain without more ado, took occasion to mention that he could not enter into oral proposals with an officer who had not brought written authority with him. An hour later Mertens was in the town again with a letter. An energetic commandant would not have received the man with a flag of truce a second time. The condition of the fortress was not desperate. Moreau could have taken advantage of the night to repair the damage he had sustained.

Mertens, however, like a clever diplomatist, exhausted himself in compliments upon the courage of the garrison and the Governor, reminded Moreau of the inadequacy of his own troops and of the strength of the allies, — fifty to one. It was a great responsibility, for the sake of a useless resistance, he argued, to expose the town to being taken by storm, and as a result pillaged and burnt. Moreau replied with the sentiment that he would let himself be buried under the ruins of his walls. But Mertens, who read his uncertainty, did not allow himself to be overawed, and represented to him that after honorable capitulation he would be at liberty to join the imperial army.

He appealed to the weak man's sense of duty by saying that in one or two, or three days at most, Soissons would be compelled to surrender in any case; that those of the soldiers who survived the assault would then become prisoners of war, and the inhabitants of the town would be exposed to the horrors of pillage, whereas now the garrison might march out free.

Nothing more was required of Moreau than to obey his original orders. The regulations read: "Make use of every means of defence, be deaf to intelligence communicated by the enemy, and be as proof against his whispers as against his attacks."

And further: " The Governor of a fortress must remember that he is defending one of the bulwarks of the Empire, and that his surrender one single day sooner than necessary may be attended with the most important consequences to the defence of the state and the safety of the army."

Moreau had several times shown himself a brave man. Without proof of courage indeed men did not attain to the rank of general under Napoleon. But he was not heroical, and doubtless he regarded the Emperor's cause as lost, as did most of the generals. He did not wish to sacrifice himself needlessly.

He summoned a council of war, at which it was shown that there were still three thousand gun-charges left and two hundred thousand cartridges. In spite of some division of opinion, the desire to continue the defence triumphed. Scarcely, however, had the council dispersed before another officer under a flag of truce arrived with a letter, in which the words "assault," "pillage," and "hew down" occurred with disquieting and terrifying effect. A fresh council of war met, and yielded; the Polish colonel was the only one who advocated resistance, but being a foreigner he had no vote.

Moreau then took the truce-maker aside, and agreed to the capitulation, on condition that the town should have no contribution levied upon it, and that the garrison should be allowed to march out with its arms and baggage. The enemy agreed.

The Governor's orders, however, had been: "When the council has been heard, the Governor of a fortress must decide alone and on his own responsibility. He must follow the firmest and most intrepid counsel not absolutely inconsistent with practicability."

Day broke. The constant coming and going of the ambassadors, the cessation of the firing, the frightful stillness, like the silence in a room where some one is dying, made the troops begin to feel uneasy. Were they to lay down their arms after having defended themselves so well? Misgivings increased. Murmurings went through the ranks, the indignation of the inhabitants mingling with that of the soldiers. The words "coward" and "traitor" were linked with Moreau's name.

It was 9 o'clock in the morning. Suddenly the cannonade in the direction of Quercq became deafening. All started at the sound. Then followed an explosion of hope and resentment in the cry: "It is the Emperor's cannon! The Emperor is coming! *C'est le canon de l'Empereur!*" — the shout that during the whole war had been the signal for fresh courage among the French and terror in the hearts of the enemy. The enemy might stand against Napoleon's generals, but he trembled before the approach of the man himself.

On every side the cry arose: "Tear the capitulation to pieces, the Emperor is coming! The dispute was still unsettled as to how many cannon the French might take with them, — two or more. The altercation grew hot. Then General Woronzof said in Russian to Löwenstern: "Let them take all their artillery with them, and mine too, so long as they vacate the fortress and go!"

The document was scarcely signed when the sound of the cannonade was distinctly heard near at hand. Moreau grew pale; he seized Löwenstern by the arm, and cried: "You have tricked me. The firing is coming nearer. It is Blücher who is fleeing. Had I not surrendered the Emperor would have driven Blücher into the Aisne. He will have me shot. I am lost."

Napoleon pardoned him; but there

is evidence to show that if the Governor had not capitulated when he did, the enemy would have raised the siege the next day.

There was a saying in France at that time that a man should always fire his last shot, because it might be the one to kill the enemy. Moreau did not fire his last shot. If he had, according to all human calculation, the enemies of France would have been beaten, and the Europe of to-day might have been different.

I know no story more suggestive, or more profound, than this of the siege of Soissons. I know none more moral.

There is no need to raise the objection that it is exceedingly uncertain whether Napoleon, had he not beaten the Russians, Prussians, and

Austrians in 1814, would not still have been ruined by some later combination of circumstances. It is quite as possible that he would have held out. He had become a different man; he was no longer swayed by ambitious dreams alone. All the greatness in him had been developed as it had never been before.

But even conceding the argument for a moment, the case only becomes greater and more important. We will suppose it thus: If Soissons had been held, Europe would have been spared fifteen years of terrible reaction. The fate of Europe was hanging on a thread. And it was snapped, not by cowardice or treachery, not by terrible privation, in the presence of which all better men are at their post, but by loyal, honorable small-mindedness. In this story we have the psychology of honorable small-mindedness.

You feel it coming, step by step. There are reasons galore for not doing the only thing that ought to be done.

You are eight hundred against fifty thousand. Is that a reason? You have fought bravely the whole day through against tremendous odds. Is that a reason? In any case you can only hold out a very short time. Is that a reason? By remaining firm you are hazarding the welfare of countless human beings; that is, by being small-minded, you may, possibly, probably, save the lives of worthy men. By yielding now you hope to be able to prove yourself a hero another time. As if these were reasons!

This present task is the one you must not shirk. This is the higher command, which must be unconditionally obeyed. This is the will of Cæsar, — the Cæsar unto whom we must all render what is his own. This is Rhodes; we must dance here. This is the spot in the universe upon which the decision depends.

And none of us can ever know whether the spot whereon we stand may not be such a turning-point, whence interminable threads start in all directions. We do not know. The only thing we do know is that now is the time to be a man, and not a weakling, a Governor, not a capitulant. And if we do not stand firm, if with the greatest respect for the circumstances we yield, and upon the most honorable terms in the world, with drums beating and trumpets sounding, we sign the capitulation, . . . close at hand we shall hear the Emperor's guns thundering loudly, and we shall feel ourselves rejected and lost, worthy of a wretch's death.

When we read so that we personally assimilate what we have read, we feel this is the central point in the course of circumstances, in the origin of actions, the central point of character, the central point of will, the central point of passion, the Archimedean spot whence the earth can be moved. The nerve of events and even of history lies bared before our eyes.

Why should we read, then? To

increase our knowledge, divest ourselves of prejudices, and in an ever greater degree become personalities. What should we read? The books that attract us and hold us fast, because they are exactly suited to us. These books are the good books for us.

Some one asked a friend of mine: "What kind of books do you prefer? — romantic, naturalistic, allegorical?" "Good books," he answered, and it was an excellent reply; for there is nothing more stupid than to stick to rubrics. That book is good for me which develops me.

How ought we to read these books? First, with affection, next, with criticism, next, if possible, so that our reading has a central point, from which we may guess or descry connections, and lastly, with the aim of fully understanding and making our own the moral lesson to be found in every event narrated.

A whole world can thus open out for us in a single book. We may become acquainted through it with some parts of human nature, wherein we shall not only recognize ourselves, — changeable and rich in alterations and transformations, — but find also the unchangeable being and eternal laws of Nature. Lastly, if we read attentively, we have the power to add to our moral stature, in so far as we vividly feel those things which ought to be done or left undone.

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