

A READER OF CHEAP BOOKS.

THE clock in the City Hall tower said it was 5.02; my watch told me it was 5.04, and, with great respect for the venerable clock that has beamed upon me like a full moon so often in the comfortable hours between midnight and daylight, I had more confidence in my watch, for I had compared it that morning with the clock in the ferry house (which never was known to vary the breadth of a compressed hair) and found it right. So, with only 11 minutes to catch the 5.15 train for New Jersey, and with the Broadway sidewalks crowded, and the roadway blocked with teams, I had no time to spare. Going part of the way down Cortlandt street, and then sheering off into Liberty street, I found myself a mite in a crowd of hurrying men with bundles and packages, all bent upon catching that same train, or similar trains, for Jersey and home. It seemed as if all New York had moved across the North River. Could there be anybody left in the city, when all those people were gone? Would the theatres be empty that night, and the hotel corridors and the streets be deserted? But it always seems so in a crowd in New York, as if there could be nobody left to be anywhere else.

It was a Saturday evening and a very bad one. Hardly evening yet by the clock—only a few minutes after 5—but evening beyond dispute by the darkness; by the little patches of foggy light around the lampposts; by the gas jets burning in all the stores. Though in midwinter, it was a foggy evening, with a chilly rain falling and treacherous icy spots hidden beneath slush and water on the sidewalks. A nasty evening to be hurrying over slippery, crowded pavements in the city; a beautiful evening, though, to reach home early and find dinner on the table, and a fire in the grate and an easy chair in front of it, and slippers warming on the fur rug. Reaching the corner of West street I learned that I was in good time without the trouble of looking at my watch again; for there were two young gentlemen in front of me, walking arm in arm under the same umbrella, and when they reached the corner, and were in the glare that shines through the big windows of the saloon there situated, one of these young gentlemen stopped and said to the other:

"Let us go in and have something to keep out the wet."

"We will miss the train," the other replied.

"Oh, no," said the first, looking at his watch, "we have plenty of time; we have nearly two minutes."

I was so occupied in thinking about this cheerful custom of standing up in front of a shelf and pouring down strong waters and then hurrying across the street to catch a boat, all within the space of two minutes; that I nearly walked between the wheels of a truck in West street. In the ferry house about as many wet and steaming people were gathered as could well gather, and every second was bringing more. Among them was a gentleman of middle age who lives in a town not far from mine and whom I knew to be on his way to as beautiful, cheerful and comfortable a home as there is in all that land of homes called Central New Jersey. Chance, or fate, or any lucky thing you will, threw us together in the crowded room, and we were about to push our way nearer the gate when he said:

"Wait till I go up to the news stand and get something to read over Sunday."

"You will not have time," I told him; "the gates are just about to open, and there is such a crowd about the news stand you will hardly be able to reach it."

"Oh, there's plenty of time," he replied. "Why we have nearly half a minute yet!"

It had surprised me before to hear two minutes called "plenty of time" but "nearly half-a-minute" beats the record, as they say in the sporting newspapers. And in that half minute he did push his way through the crowd in front of the news stand, and run rapidly over a pile of cheap books standing there, and select one, and buy a handful of evening papers, and pay for them all, and still we had a few seconds to spare.

"What in the world do you suppose all those people read, who were pushing up to the news stand?" he asked me, when we were comfortably seated in the ferryboat.

"Newspapers, I suppose," I told him.

"Yes, of course, they all read the papers," he replied, "but not half of that crowd about the news stand were buying newspapers. Most people buy their papers before they start for the ferry. I have often noticed that the crowds are bigger in front of the piles of cheap books than in front of the place where the newspapers are. A man generally has his papers in his pocket when he leaves his office; but the ferry house is the last chance to secure other reading matter, for that day at least; and every evening, but particularly on Saturday evenings, they must sell enough cheap books to stock a library."

"Well," I said, "I see you have been buying one of the cheap books yourself. Perhaps you can judge from your own selection something of what other people read."

"I just picked up a little story of adventure," he replied. "It is the hardest matter in the world for me to find anything I care to read in all those heaps of paper-covered books."

"You ought to be able to find almost anything you want among them," I told him; "for they include nearly everything under the sun, and some things that seem to have been born under the influence of the moon."

"A little 'looney,' do you mean?" he laughed. "Well, some of them are. It has often struck me that a poor book must sell nearly as well as a good one in this cheap form, if it only has a good title—for people standing in a crowd in front of a counter do not have a chance to examine a book; they take their chances and consider that it's only the loss of a quarter at the worst. I'm afraid that I'm getting pretty nearly 'read out.' Sometimes I have to fall back on my own library and take down Scott or Dickens or Thackeray again, for I find that Dickens for the twentieth time is often more entertaining than a 'modern' novel just off the press. You know I read for amusement, pure and simple; if a book amuses me, I call it good, if it doesn't, I call it bad."

"You are very frank to admit it," I said.

"It is no more than the truth," he replied. "And it is the same, in my opinion, with nine-tenths of the people who read. Some people, of course, are amused or 'pleased,' if you choose to put it so, with books of a more solid sort. The ministers, for instance, read McCosh on *The Supernatural in the Relation to the Natural*, not because they believe that McCosh can tell them much about it, but because it amuses or pleases them. Doctors read the new medical works, nine times out of ten, because, being interested in the subject, the works interest them, and in a sense amuse them. If you look at it closely I think you will find that where one person reads for instruction, a hundred read for amusement. Sometimes, of course, we get instruction and amusement at the same time, as in the case of histories and some scientific works. Think of what you read yourself, and see if you do not read almost entirely for amusement. If you find that a book does not amuse you how soon do you lay it down?"

I was forced to admit not only that my own reading was almost wholly for amusement, but that most of my acquaintances had the same laudable end in view.

"I think that my case," my friend continued, "is the case of the mass of the American people, I read enough solid things in my early days, in school and college, to satisfy what desire I had for information. I am tolerably familiar with ancient and modern history, and know something of the classics. After a good day's work in the office I want something at home to interest and please me, in other words, to amuse me. Even the newspapers I read solely because they interest me, and therefore amuse me. So do most people, I imagine. So when I take up a book I want to find it as interesting, as amusing as possible. And it is the hardest thing in the world for me to find anything new that does amuse me. Has it ever occurred to you that there is nobody living just now who can write?"

"It has occurred to me," I replied, "that there are a great many people living just now who do write."

"They think they do," he went on, "but they don't. What would be the sensations of any reader of fiction, do you think, if he could go into a bookstore and buy a new novel by Dickens, or by Scott, or Thackeray? Do you think he would stop to look over the list for a work by any author now living?"