

Titles of Books.

THE title of a novel is conventionally supposed to be a phrase condensing into a few words a suggestion of the hero, the plot, or some incident of the story. In reality this is not so. In their mad chase for recognition, many novelists, or more properly, writers of novels, have given to their work some puzzling sensational title, thinking in a blind superficial way that it will attract attention to the work by exciting curiosity. In these days when the cheap, catching and deceptive masquerade in titles has become so popular, the potency is lost by its very commonness, and the individuality of the book destroyed by assuming the gaudy uniform of works of inferior rank.

Prompted no doubt by high, honest motives, an English religious publishing house has started a *Penny Library* of the best fiction in order to kill sensational literature among boys and girls by developing a taste for stories of a higher moral and literary tone. Among the early announcements, however, are found three books of strangely sensational titles: *Gone*; *Three Times Tried*; and *Saved by the Skin of His Teeth*. If the plan is a brilliant attempt by strategy to betray the young boy into reading them, in the hope and delusion that the story is as exciting as the title, the scheme will not succeed. The principle is wrong, the idea cheap and petty, and warranted to mislead a wide-awake boy only once. If *Saved by the Skin of His Teeth* indicates the character of the story, the boy would probably be reformed more quickly if he did not read it. If it does not give the spirit of the book, it is not the proper title: either the inside or the outside should be changed for consistency's sake. To the young reader, prepared for that work by a diligent apprenticeship at Indian stories and road-agents' adventures, it would suggest—"Winsome Willy, the Boy Scout, as he leaned over the treacherous precipice, with no hold save the slippery, rain-soaked moss, seemed by an almost superhuman effort to support his body for a second, while with a giant's might he caught the beautiful Indian girl *Tahle-gua* from the angry, yawning waters." With such high enthusiastic expectations roused by the title, will not the reader feel disappointed, angered and aggrieved to find that it is only the story that "Herbert Jolly had been led away by evil companions who taught him to drink and steal, and when he was almost ready for the gallows, he reformed, and was thus saved by the skin of his teeth." The reaction from the expectation to the realization is too

strong for him, and the feeling that he has been cheated makes the boy give too little credit to the story he might have thoroughly enjoyed if the title had not led him to expect an exciting and thrilling story of magnificent villainy on a broad scale, instead of a narrative of prosaic, everyday naughtiness developed into unattractive crime.

Perhaps to some persons the title of a book is of trifling import. Dodging behind the ambush of proverbial philosophy, they say, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." But no name but "rose" can bring before the mind the combination of characteristics—colour, form, perfume, texture and velvety beauties—it represents. There is in a name more than any mere reasoning can elicit. Words have a living power of absorbing certain qualities, traits and meanings, which they ever retain. Some slang phrase of odd formation—some striking absurdity, but of no special meaning, passing from lip to lip, by some mysterious accretion gathers to itself a meaning which in a short time it seems nothing else in the language expresses so well. It is difficult to think of any Christian name abstractly, for the mind unconsciously brings with the name the average of the qualities of all our acquaintances bearing that name. The force of a name cannot always be passed over as a mere accident.

Perhaps there may be some law of relationship existing between the work and its name that the qualities necessary for writing a good novel play an equal part in making the title. It can hardly be a coincidence that all the noblest works of fiction to-day, all the classic novels, those that we read with ever-increasing interest and affection, have simple titles. The best ten novels of the world at a recent voting were pronounced to be: *Ivunhoe*, *Adam Bede*, *Romola*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Les Misérables*, *David Copperfield*, *Henry Esmond*, *Wilhelm Meister*, *On the Heights*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These titles are simple, direct, and appropriate.

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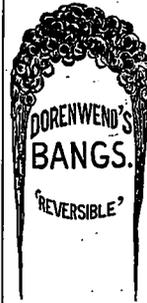
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