



The Literary Department

Learning for Life



The Best Literature for Young Canadians

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PART I.

Literature is a hopeful subject to present to Canadians. Other nations can boast a literature that dates back to the remotest antiquity. England has her Beowulf, Germany her Niebelungen Lied and France her Chanson de Roland. The glory of Grecian and Roman literature had blossomed and faded centuries before inquiring minds worried about undiscovered regions beyond the untravelling seas. But, while the old world looks with pardonable pride on a literature that is past, on a glory that has been, the new world looks forward with hope to a reputation of the future, to a literary prowess that is still to be. Youngest among the daughters of the New World is fair Canada. Beautiful she is beyond compare, and wealthy beyond computation, the latest debutante among the nations, the virgin whom the Muses are only beginning to woo. She stands but on the threshold of her life, in all the glory and buoyancy of her youth. She peers into the darkened future beyond, but she sees no lurking goblins; she thinks of the days that are to come, and her heart is full of hope.

If literature is a hopeful subject for Canadians, for Methodists it is doubly so. Methodism, the latest birth of Protestantism, was cradled in a university and its sponsors were black-robed Oxonians. It is not unnatural that such men should be enthusiastic and active in the use of the press and in the circulating of improving and wholesome literature. John Wesley employed either his pen or his tongue almost continuously for the public good. His Christian library of fifty volumes was an effort to bring to the common people some of the treasures of literature and he encouraged the purchase of these books by giving the poor the advantage of cheap prices sustained by large sales. So the Wesleys were equally exhorting to religion and encouraged in education.

To the Methodists can be traced several innovations along literary lines. It was a group of Wesleyan preachers who edited the first number of the Arminian Magazine on January 1, 1778, and their Wesleyan successors have published it continuously to the present day. The Arminian Magazine, or, as it is now called, the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, is the oldest periodical magazine in the world. If periodical literature has been a curse to the world, the Methodist Church has been an abettor to the evil; if it has been a blessing, the world cannot in justice withhold its praise.

It was a Methodist, too, who first conceived for the young the idea of the study of the world's great Book. Sophia Cooke had caught the enthusiasm of the Wesleys, and suggested to Robert Raikes that he organize a Sunday School in connection with the parish church. When a number of ragged urchins had been persuaded to offer themselves as victims to the new enterprise, this devoted woman marched with Raikes at the head of the troop to the

parish church, and became the first Sunday School teacher.

Since those early days, education has never ceased to be popular with the Methodist church. The majority of teachers, both in the Sunday and in the every-day schools of the land are members of the Methodist Communion. But educational superiority is a challenge to leadership, and in all movements of social and moral reform Methodism has contributed her quota of leaders. Well may Young Canada look to her Methodists to hold high the standard of education, so that, within her borders, ignorance shall be held a disgrace, and want and crime shall find no lodging-place.

If to speak of literature to Canadians is hopeful, and to Canadian Methodists is doubly so, it is a treble hopeful theme to present to Epworth League youth. It is time of hope, and in our Canadian Epworth League we have the fifteen-year-old organization of young Canadian Methodism with its history all in the future. I do not mean to suggest that the prime object of the Epworth League should be the literary culture of its members, but I do maintain that if the Methodist Church is to fulfill her promise to the world, religion and education must continue to walk hand in hand, and, if the Epworth League is to accomplish its mission in the church, the literary department must not be neglected. It is the avowed purpose of the Epworth League to become fishers of men and if kept well baited, the Literary Department can and should be the League's most alluring and effective fishhook.

Times have changed since the days of Wesley. In those early times the light was coveted possession, the reward of a series of sacrifices. To-day it is as if we were in a factory where literary showmen are displaying their wares, fresh from the presses, at remarkably low prices. Our ancestors had difficulty in procuring books because of their scarcity; our difficulty now is to get near enough to the bargain counter to make a good selection.

"The Immortal Ruskin once wrote 'Seven Lamps to Architecture': I am presumptuous enough to try to light a few lamps to literature. Yet when I think of the strong, illuminating light shed from Ruskin's lamps, I should indeed be presumptuous if I should name my faltering suggestions other than feeble, flickering candles. But a candle can give some light, and, if, by my modest little torches, some one catches a glimpse of a single gem of literature, my candles will not burn in vain.

It has been argued that books have done more harm than good in the world; that, since the invention of printing, memory has fallen sadly into disuse, and that the evil of the mass of bad and useless literature outweighs the benefits derived from the few good books. If this is true, the majority of people are guilty of the misuse of books and are cramming into their heads that which might better have been used to fill a furnace. Harm can come to no one through books except where there is a response from the evil within the mind to the temptation within the book. The will is the little tyrant that holds the key to the situation.

This power of selection in mental matters makes man mentally as well as

morally, a responsible being. There is a mental character as well as a moral character, and a failure to develop it means a folding up in a napkin of one of the Creator's special gifts to the race. Yet the mental and the moral are so closely related that it is not difficult to judge one by the other, and a man's choice of books is an unerring index to his moral character.

If a man is fond of reading the biographies of great men, it is easy reasoning to say that he is, perhaps unconsciously, yearning for greatness in his own life; if he chooses history, he would learn the lessons that God has taught the nations through the ages; if he delights to read his Bible, it is because he has learned to love its Nazarene Hero; does he study sociology, education or legislation, he is but obeying the second great commandment; does he delve in science, he finds a pleasure in thinking God's thoughts after his; does he read of travels in unknown lands, he rejoices in the greatness and beauty of the Almighty's footstool; if he revels in poetry or in prose poetically expressed, he delights to find his own worthiest thoughts and feelings clothed in language that would not amount to the commonplace.

Such readers are living in an intellectual heaven, but the great majority are still without the gates totally oblivious to what they are missing. A preacher in his sphere might speak of them as the "grocery store class." Having no convenient time at their disposal, they seek in books the wherewithal to spend it. One book serves the purpose as well as another, or perhaps a magazine or a newspaper is preferred. They choose their literature almost by chance and are no other readers than those with a striking title and an attractive binding. They judge whether or not they have devoured a given book by the familiar or unfamiliar look of its illustrations. To a reader of this stamp, the saloons of literature are intellectual lounging-places where the light of thought is sugary nothings, breathe in the poisonous fumes of mere literary garbage, and become drunken with bad men's worst thoughts. Sir Gilbert Parker says in this connection that the curse of light reading is worse than the demon of drunkenness in that the latter destroys its victims outright, whereas the former leaves a vast horde of living incompetents whose wills have been added and whose fancy, not imagination, has been morbidly developed.

But society is not free of literary diplomats. These must be nurtured by the dregs of literature, if "something horribly exciting and blood-curdling mixed with 'something refreshingly immoral'" is repeatedly and unblushingly ordered from a bill-of-fare that embraces the literary heritage of all the ages, one is not materially put about to judge either the mental or the moral calibre of the reader.

In the face of the unmistakable relationship existing between mental and moral character, it is essential that the youth of the land should enjoy the protection afforded by good, helpful literature. As long as the milk and honey of our intellectual landscape are so easily won for the saving remnant, and self-respecting young men and women continue to allow themselves to be pampered with delicacies even to loathing, and stimulated to stupidity with excessive excitement, to become ravenous and mawkish, gratified with nothing but candy, and with no self-control for more than an hour—just so long will it be incumbent upon our preachers and our reformers to advocate a literary as well as a social and moral reform.

(To be Concluded.)

"The foundation of knowledge must be laid by reading."—Dr. Johnson.