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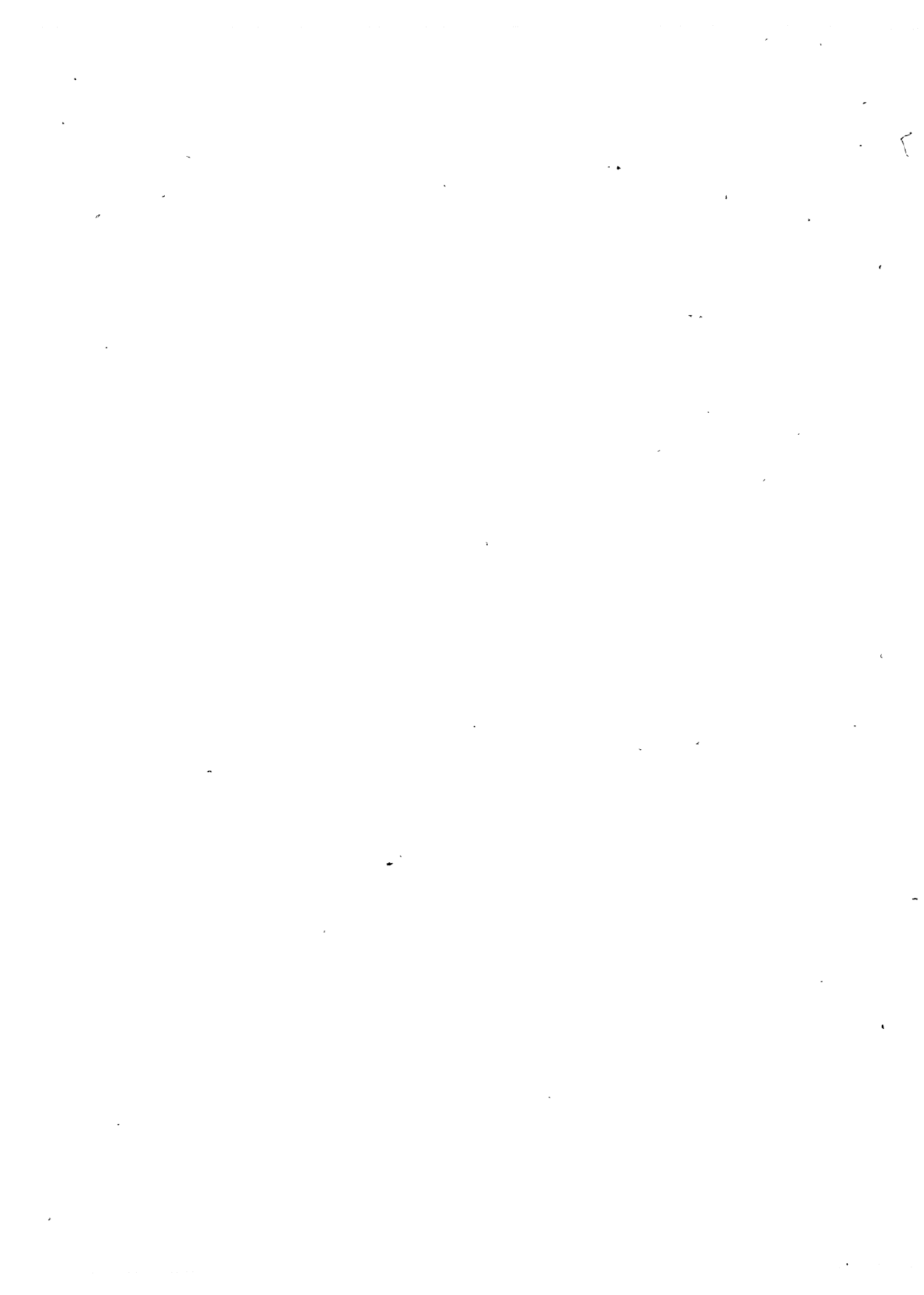
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An Address

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

ABERDEEN ASSOCIATION

WINNIPEG

JANUARY, 1895

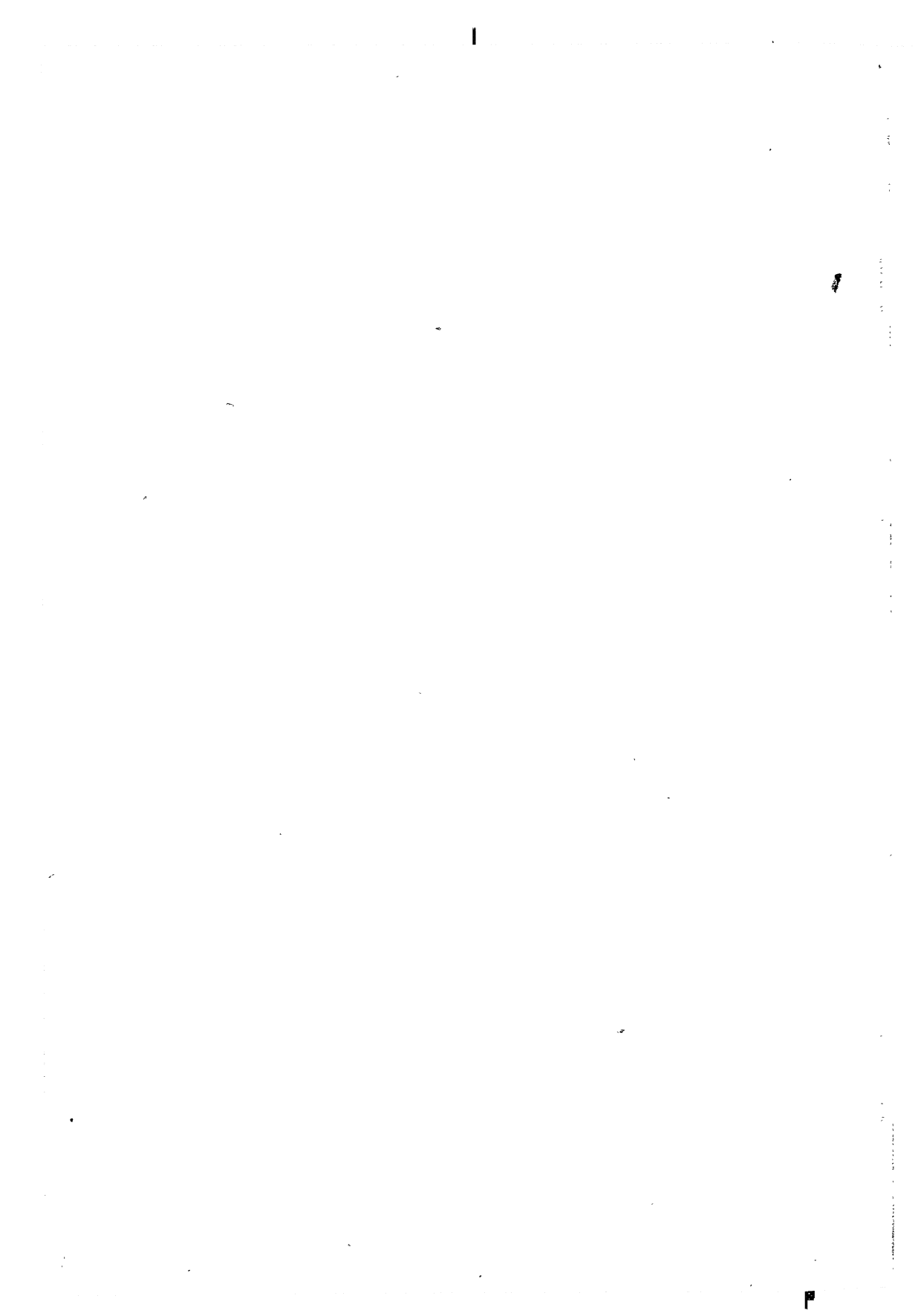
BY

GERTRUDE ADAMS FISHER

OTTAWA :

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF THOBURN & CO., NO. 36 ELGIN STREET

1895



AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE ABERDEEN ASSOCIATION, WINNIPEG, JANUARY,
1895, BY GERTRUDE ADAMS FISHER.

*Madam, President, and Ladies of the
Aberdeen Association:—*

It would be a bold deed for the stranger at your door to venture any information regarding a work so near to your hearts, so unique in purpose, so successful in operation, so far reaching in influence. It was natural that I stood agast before your worthy President's suggestion to present a paper. But when she added "Surely you can speak to us on profitable reading," I felt that it was but chatting with you of the friends I loved, and why I loved them, to accept her kindly invitation.

A band of worthy women, working with a noble leader, to scatter light in dark places, to keep the distant children of the prairie in touch with the onward march of life that throbs and pulsates at the centres, may rightfully look for God's richest blessing on their work.

Truly, "A faith in something and an enthusiasm for something, make something, make life worth living." But the interests which control our lives are manifold. We belong to an era of intellectual activity. The value of education is universally accepted. No sane man pleads for ignorance, nor doubts that "Knowledge is power." The history of nations proves it. We may have educational hobbies. We may differ regarding subject and method, but we would all demand breadth and culture along some line.

Whatever our specialty, the library is the most potent factor of our work: and we may not realize how fully we are exponents of our reading. From first to last, books are a mighty influence in our lives. They are the friends of childhood. They furnish the castles and dreams of youth. They offer the comfort and consideration of age. They are the formative force of the world, the working power which moulds the individual and the national life. They establish the church and revolutionize the state. Religions strengthen and thrones weaken before the power of the pen. What a rare legacy is this field of book lore! How the volumes teem with the best brain of a ripe age and a thinking world; often with the very heart's blood of those earnest souls who are agonizing to uplift humanity. How the books plead, trumpet tongued, the experience of all ages. Standing by the great Clarendon Press as the leaves of the precious Oxford Bible are rolled out, one feels that the printer has his hand upon the lever which moves the thinking world. We are bound to be readers, and live with books. The momentous question becomes one of choice. What class of silent friends are we admitting to our hearts and homes? With time so precious, with life's earnest work before us, with our burning need for strength and wisdom to perform it, dare we make a frivolous choice, dare we choose any but the brave and helpful? As self-respecting women, we are forced to choose our books as we would choose our friends, that they may elevate and not degrade us. If life is full of carking care, and we have but a few hurried moments stolen from household duties, are we not morally responsible that brain shall be stimulated, hope quickened, aspirations lifted by the best the world affords? It is the earnest, thoughtful, serious friend who is restful and helpful, who renews our hope, and inspires our faint purpose and bids us be brave and loyal through the conflict. We find in her a tower of strength, for she is God-inspired. Our books are the friends of solitude and private life. We may think to kill time,—God's precious boon to man—with the trashy, sensational story, but

we kill our intellects—ourselves as well—and for such criminality no valid excuse exists. Long years of habit may have resulted in perverted taste, just as children fed on dainties are unfitted for substantial. We see the little ones crouched over their story book, burying heart and head in its pages, and do we realize all it means to them—that they people the world with these puppets of fancy, who become the heroes of their dream life? Do we interest ourselves in these same books? Do we know and care what the children read? Are we on the alert to greet every new volume which enters the home lest a most insidious foe creep into our midst? Rather do we direct, control and choose the reading, though the children be unconscious that we are the ruling power? They might resist dictation if they felt it, but let us live in their books enjoy them and discuss them, that the gems of literature may be household messengers in our circle. What accumulated wisdom would be the heritage of these young lives, if all their reading hours were spent with the best writers? And can we estimate the loss, through time misspent in muddy literature? For my own first dip into this limitless sea of nonsense, I was indebted to the Christmas present of a Sunday school teacher. The next year she salved her conscience by giving me a Bible. But my rescue was effected through the heroic action of a wise, brave father, who found me buried in the covers of trash, and calmly said, "Return that book to-morrow, and remember that the next one of that sort which enters the home will be confined to the fire." The best in all things is none too good for the bright young lives which form the nation's hope. They are the men and women of to-morrow. Where the refining influence of college settlement has affected the life of the Bowery, the street music of "Comrades" is replaced by Brahm's Lullaby; and if we would gain the spiritual help of a musical education for our girls, choice bits of harmony from Mozart or Beethoven will fill their repertoire. Let the simplest arrangement of a classic melody ring through the soul, to leave neither room nor taste for Tara-ra-boom-de-ay.

I use the word classic advisedly, for I would give the children only classic reading: not musty dead lore, but the excellent, the authorized, the living quickening power of fact and fiction. I would not banish childhood's precious legacy, the story book. Only let the tale be clean and sweet and wholesome—a breath of moral ozone, to uplift the thought and quicken fancy by a healthy imagery. The purposeless book is worse than useless. It is baneful. But it is a mistake to slap the child in the face with the moral of a story, and bore him with a sermon. The average child is quick and keen to discover all of good or bad which lies within the covers. How tremendous then the responsibility of choice which rests with the elders. Let us begin this course of classic reading with the infant in the cradle; and thenceforward to the grave, no matter how varied the subject, or how diverse the style, we may keep the same trend of pure taste and lofty thought. Why insult the baby ears with unintelligible jargon of deformed English, or with impossible adventures of Mother Goose gibberish? To soothe the restless eyelids into slumber, mother's need look no further than Tennyson's Cradle Song—sweet musical and nature-loving "What does little birdie say in her nest at peep of day?" And what dearer nursery ditty could we ask than Holland's beautiful lines "What is the little one thinking about? Very wonderful things no doubt." Would we hold the child enwrapped in hero-worship, fire his fancy by poetic thought, or rouse his sluggish spirit by brave deeds, the myths of Greece and the legends of Rome are our material. Faithful Penelope still weaves her magic web. Princess Nausicaa leads her maids to primitive laundry by the river. Virginius saves his daughter's honor; and Horatius guards the bridge alone. From the day when a child is old enough to hear a story, why should he not hear classic lore? Truth is eternal, valiant deeds imperish-

able. They have a keener fascination for the ardent child than for the cool critic of mature years. Let Socrates, the martyr-scholar, and Leonidas the martyr-soldier, be the heroes of the nursery, and the child of ten years may be an appreciative student of the world's history; while the truth that is stranger than all fiction, will breathe in the annals of the early explorers, discoverers, settlers, in the life of good King Alfred, and the valorous deeds of the Crusaders. As the little one steps from the nursery, the Kindergarten is, of course, his keynote to a liberal education; and here we revel in choice literature. The nature stories, the songs of trade and occupation, keep the child near to the heart interests of humanity, and people his world with honest men and women, who labor in the humble walks of life, and on whom he is dependent. The child acquires a sturdy manliness. He gains respect and sympathy for drudging toil. In his simple way he has been blacksmith. He has walked a little with the Saviour of man, while trying to be a carpenter. If he absorb the sweet spirit of the kindergarten, he can never be iron-hearted capitalist or social snob. He is the germ of the future humanitarian. To his workmen he will be the courteous gentleman, and he will respect the flower and love the dumb beast, as parts of God's plan of creation. Nor have we older ones outgrown this healthful literature. We laugh or cry with the children as the "Bird's Christmas Carol," "Timothy's Quest," or "The story of Patsy" touches our hearts. And Mrs. Wiggin speaks to us in serious strain through the Distaff papers of the Kindergarten, where the ablest women have voiced their theories of juvenile education. Through Kindergarten training, when the *whole* child was sent to school, and every faculty was quickened, reading has become a speedy accomplishment. Then let him follow the career of Black Beauty and Beautiful Joe, or read the lesson of devotion in the story of "Rab and his Friends." We need not declare "Handsome is that handsome does," for the child finds the hero in that ugly little cur with neither ear nor tail. Longfellow's "Birds of Killingworth" will promote love of the feathered nestlings, and prompt the child towards an Audobon Club, which shall wage an anti-plumage war in defence of the gay songsters.

A world of fairy literature is stored in the story of "The Culprit Fay," where amid gossamer threads and filmy webs, the elves prove the law of penalty for sin; that the best in life is won by work, and "Heaven is not reached by a single bound." If we would guide the child further into fairyland, its riches are revealed through Shakespeare's fantastic conception of "Midsummer Night's Dream." We know how books of travel enlarge the child's vision with the history or geography of other times and lands; and the classic story of "The Silver Skates" presents a realistic sketch of old Dutch life, though the author had only seen Holland through the eyes of an invalid friend. Would you teach a child of Norway's wondrous glaciers and its famous fiords? Let him read the pastoral poem Lars, and journey from the land of Midnight Sun to the green vale of Pennsylvania farms. He will feel the throb of hot viking blood, and the serenity of quaker life. He will study Norwegian dress and manners, note the merry wedding and the bloody duel. He will find the northern turbulency a contrast to the quaker quiet, nor will he miss the character study, as he learns how the redeeming love of Christ subdues the wildest nature to Himself. In "Sorab and Rustum" Matthew Arnold thrills the reader with the matchless beauty of tone-color, the regal splendor of oriental setting, and that fatal disaster which charms us even as we recognize the irony of destiny.

Would you acquaint the child with the green fields of merry England, and the rocky coast of Scotland? Follow William Winter from the quiet church which treasures Shakespeare's dust beside the winding Avon,

across the fields of Shottery by footpath and stile, to the thatched home of William's love, where the black beams, quaint china, and old fashioned posies will put one in touch with the days and doings of the great bard. Or travel up the rugged coast to enjoy the sublimity of a wild storm on bleak Iona, where, alone with God, one feels the force of the tempest.

I recall a Christmas picture sent to the Children's Hospital. It was an artist's proof of the Child in the manger. No wa-te of money that. It was the cultural influence which we longed to give these waifs of property and we found it in the exquisite setting of the Christ Child who said, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." While your little one broods over worthy thoughts, would you educate him in art and acquaint him with the master strokes of canvas, would you familiarize him with angel faces of the heavenly realm, with the spiritual beauty of Madonnas and Holy children, that he too may be pure in spirit, place in his hands Miss Hurri's unique record of "Child Life in Art." The author will tell him of beggars, princes and cherubs, who are imperishable upon the canvas, the historic ideal, and real, which touch the heart of sympathy.

We strangely wrong the child in thinking he cannot appreciate our choicest writers. He catches far more than he loses. Chaucer's Tales, judiciously chosen, will enchant him with the picture of the Middle Ages, and give the historic setting of the daily life and manners, thought and action, creed and culture, of every grade and station in that period of English development. The Knight, the Squire, the Nun, the Parson, will join the passing pageant and reveal the notions of the day.

From the first line of "Fairy Queen," where "A gentle knight was pricking o'er the plain," the child is enchained. He may miss an abstruse point in the great allegory of religious warfare, but the Red Cross Knight in glistening armour is his hero, and he marches with him to the fight in defence of Holy Church and Truth. Greed, vice, avarice become abhorrent, as they stride past in undisguised ugliness. The child tears the mask from the oily-tongued hermit, and Hypocrisy becomes detestable, while Truth wears a halo of undying glory. If history beguile the child, Motley's thrilling pages will put him in touch with the heroic Hollanders. William the Silent will speak through patriotism, and that terse epigram "Better a drowned land than a lost land," will mean the brave heart-throb of a despairing people.

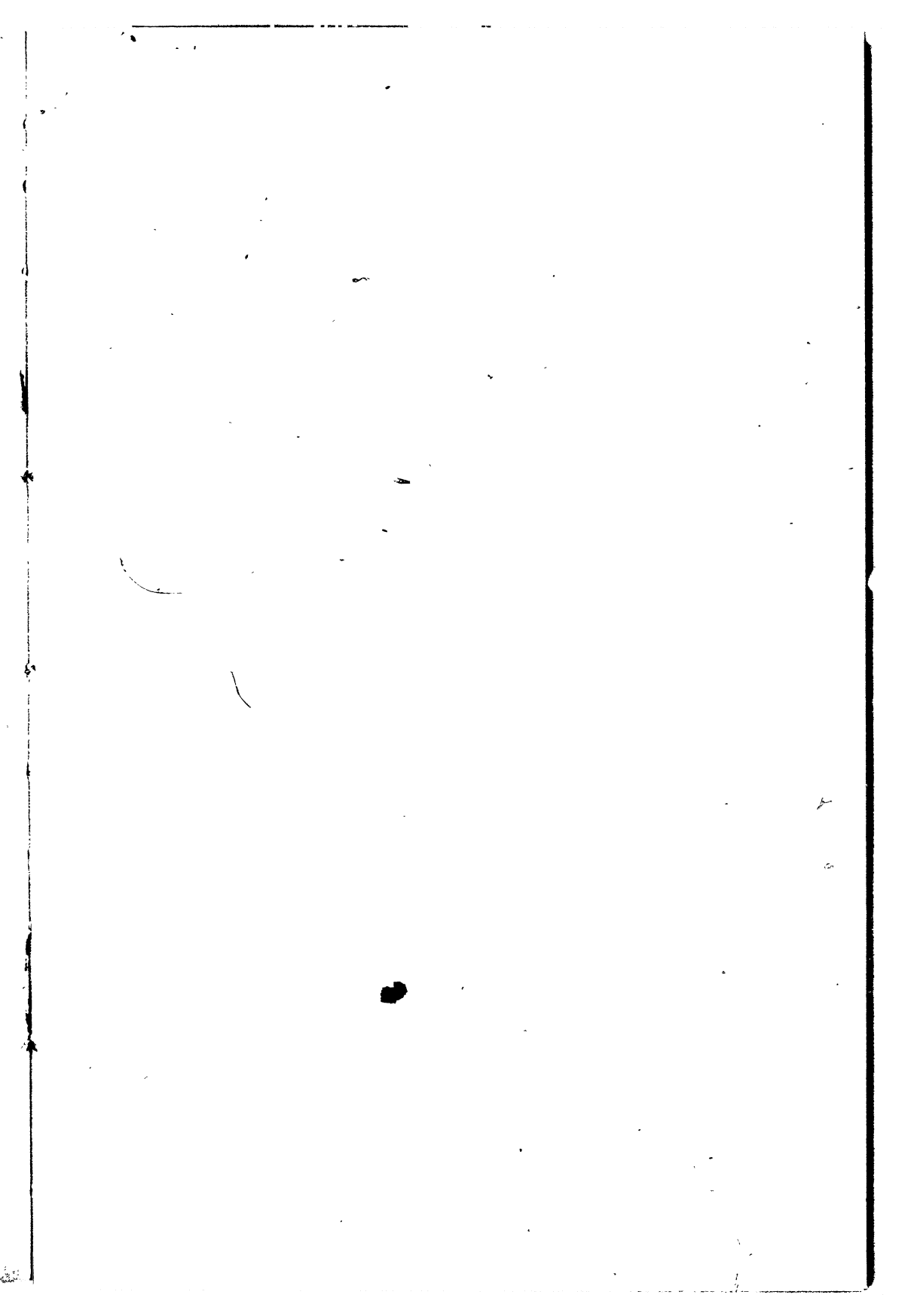
Prescott's story of Queen Isabella, of Charles the Fifth, of Mexico, of Peru—will unfold the glories of Spanish life the grandeur and the bigotry of a famed queen, the political upheaval of Europe, the fight for thrones, and dogmas, the might of an ancient people now little more than a name upon earth and the pride, danger and heroism which accompanied discovery and conquest among the Aztecs and the Incas.

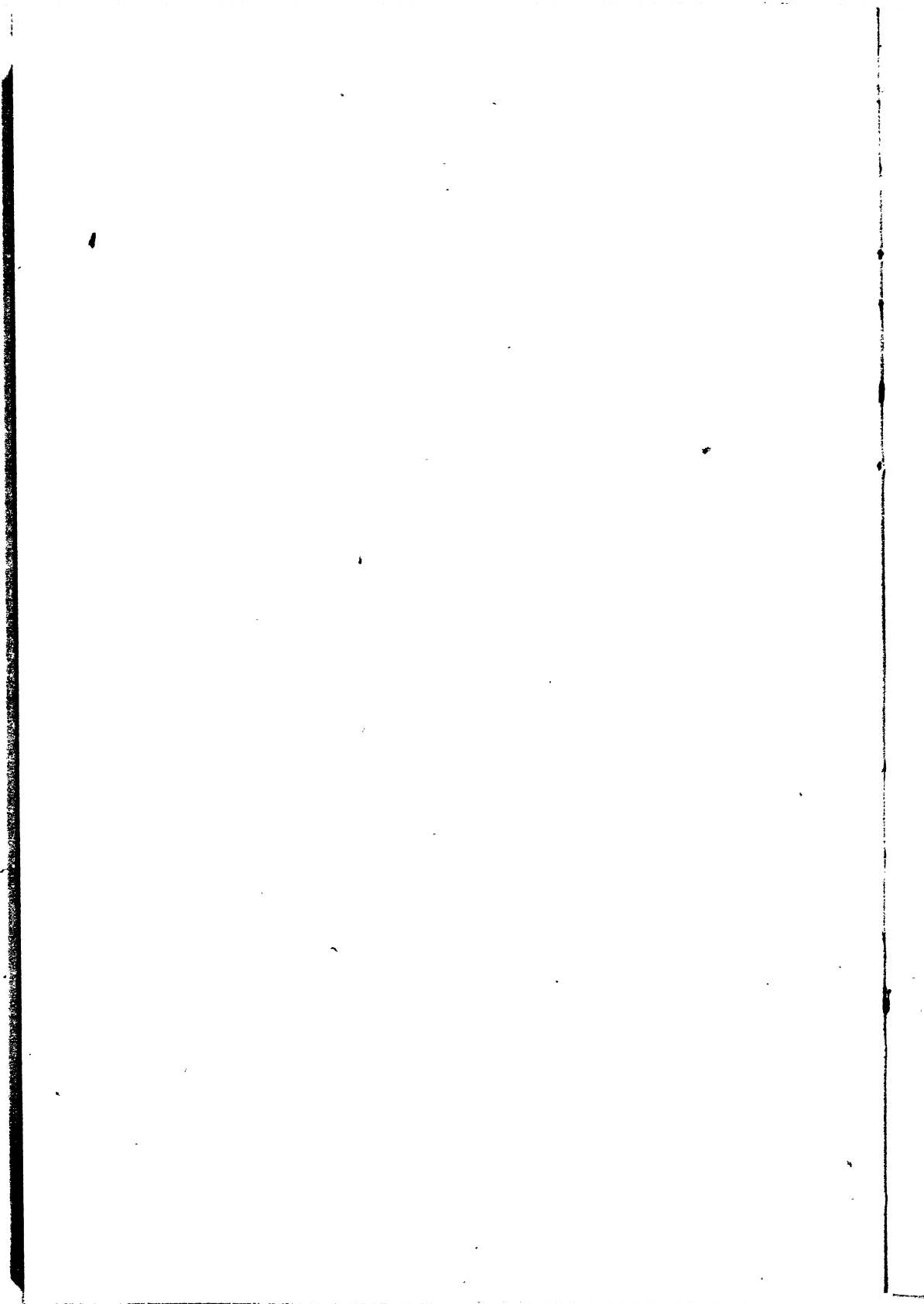
In pages that bristle with dauntless daring, Scott draws the lance and waves the banner of the famed knight-errant. Through chapters emblazoned with purple and fine linen, he peoples the ivy-clad castle of Kenilworth, and the pleasure court is thronged with Leicester's gay pageant, which pays homage to the Virgin Queen. Human folly, petty passion, and dark tragedy are here immortalized on History's scroll.

George Elliot's Romola tells the story of Florence when the uncomprising Savonarola shook the city to its centre, and throne and pulpit trembled beneath his fiery eloquence.

In burning verse, Mrs. Browning, too, pleads with sympathetic heart for her loved and lovely Florence, and indeed for all sunny Italy.

A fond parent once said to me, "Our boy of ten is teaching his grown-up sister Spencer's "Fairy Queen," and he flings an apt bit of Shakespeare at us for every sentiment we utter. You are whetting the appetite for good things." Yes, and they readily assimilated the diet. "Do not saw





the air so with your hand," said a little boy to his chum who carelessly swung his arm on high. Again, we held a spelling bee, and a laddie crossed by mistake to the opposing line. "I didn't call you," said the leader: "Lay not that flattering unction to your soul."

I recall a reading of the twenty-third psalm, when the teacher asked, "Children, who wrote this psalm?" At first dead silence reigned. Then a pair of bright eyes flashed, and a little hand shot into the air. "Well, Johnny, who wrote the twenty-third psalm?" "Longfellow," was the positive response. It was only a confusion of terms. He had heard little of the Bible, but he had treasured the poet's "Psalm of Life."

I could have told the fond parent that we guarded his boy more carefully than he did. The lad had brought us a complete diagram of White-chapel. Jack the Ripper's haunts were skillfully depicted. The scenes of bloody outrage were diagnosed with critical care, for our boy had buried his brains in an infamous bundle of sensational trash, the daily paper. What more morbid and distorting influence could enter a child's life? He had inhaled the very sewer-gas of literature, breathed a poison so insidious that his household did not realize its deadly existence. Yet how many of these white roses, which we would keep as pure and spotless as when they first bloomed in the home garden, are absorbing the slang, sensations, scandals of these daily columns! *Indiscriminate* newspaper reading, with its horrors of murder and suicide, its revelations of low life, is not fit food for the children. Yet how seldom are they kept from brooding over its ghastly pages. We marvel if their impressible little minds do not become a veritable chamber of horrors. The teacher of to day is working a noble reform. But she cannot counteract the influence of some homes. Those who have been privileged to spend years in home life, who have guided the children from the cradle are morally responsible for the results. Theirs is the shame, yes, the iniquity, if, after years of personal influence, chewing gum, playing pedro, and browsing over paper-covered trash, evoke the highest enthusiasm of the young folks. While we plead for the best within the covers, we cannot ignore the cultural influence of a well-bound book. As we respect the dainty dress before the slovenly garment of hideous color, so the æsthetic value of clear type, heavy paper and attractive binding must be recognized. The pretty exterior is an education in culture, just as the shabby cover is a step toward vulgarity. Let us, so far as means permit, give the child the benefit of beauty, though we cannot always gratify our aspirations for an edition de luxe. Give the child a good book externally, internally and eternally, and teach him to approach it lovingly, reverently, with clean hands and a pure heart. What is this treasure which his hand has grasped? It is a daily-recurring miracle—so common that we forget it is a wonder—this conception and evolution of the human intellect. It represents the education of ages. It stands for the brain, yes the heart and hope of the grandest men and women. We should no more treat it shabbily than we would insult our dearest friend, and wound him to the heart. We may forgive the idiot who turns down the leaves, soils the pages, and doubles back the covers, but the children we have trained must not be guilty of such gross depreciation, such vulgar disrespect for childhood's precious boon.

The reading table should be the luminous centre of the home, and the reading circle the anticipated hour of the day. The tired father, realizing his beneficent influence at the household hearth, will graciously lend his voice to the story, and the little one who has just worked his way through the intricacies of spelling, may long to air his accomplishment. Each has a right to respectful attention from every member of the household, and we surely would not hurt our dear ones by disregard of the kindly effort. Consider the pleasure and profit, the household harmony, which are the

outgrowth of this method. In the economy of time, five pairs of hands may knit, or sew, or weave a bit of delicate embroidery, while a half dozen heads may follow the life of Captain January, and applaud his generous love for the little waif cast upon his island home. As they study this unique bit of humanity, they realize the culture resulting from friendship with two good books—the masterpieces of the language—Shakespeare and the Bible. In the sweet story of Marie, they see the softening, purifying power of music; as the fiddle strings respond to the touch of the appreciative beggar maid. Laura Richards will “point a moral and adorn a tale” that shall always help the home.

We have mentioned master minds of English that have stood the centuries’ test. We have felt the power—for good or ill—of modern fiction. We know how the American poet has laid at our feet his wreath of immortelles. Whittier has sketched an ideal home, humble, wholesome, self-respecting and inspiring. He portrays a heart attuned to brotherhood, a life of self-control and balance, a purpose deep and tender, a high philosophy for the present, an eternal hope for the future.

Longfellow mingles character study with historic truth, as Evangeline relates the life of the gentle Acadian peasant in the fair field of Grand Pré, and Miles Standish typifies the stern puritan, not less rugged than the rock-bound coast of Plymouth, which was his dreary home. To the lover of history and the student of Christ, Hiawatha equally appeals. It abounds in Indian lore and legend, imagery and poetic fancy. The assembling of the tribes at command of the Great Spirit, the cleansing in the river, the smoking of the peace-pipe, all bear a deep significance. The story seems a Bible parallel. The little boy who came according to promise, and lived so near to nature, in sweet sympathy with created things, true to a lofty purpose “for the profit of the people,” is strongly suggestive of the Christ Child and the plan of Redemption.

If we cannot interest our young folks in the lines of Irving, let us find the fault and rectify it. The sunny land of Andalusia lies before us at mention of Alhambra and Granada. The scroll of Moorish history is unrolled. The turreted castle teems with life, and a royal pageant sweeps past us in a spectacular array. Or let the Sketch Book reveal the jollities of English Christmas, with the merriment of mistletoe, the glory of blazing yule log, and the odor of steaming pudding. Would we catch a glimpse of American landscape? The lordly Hudson, hooded mountains, hazy hills and sleepy dale are before us. In character study we are forced to despise all that is unworthy in the fawning Ichabod, and if Rip Van Winkle catch the fancy by his broad good humor, we find him a more dangerous foe than Ichabod, since his selfishness is more subtle, while he impresses the strongest-temperance lesson which stage or story has revealed. In the Abbey sketch we read the records of the past, and every slab suggests the value of life. Explorers, discoverers, scientists, poets, artists, historians, generals, statesmen, monarchs!

What an array is this! What a resumé of goodness, greatness, glory! What a contrast in life’s aims! Royal trappings and armorial bearings pale before the names of heroes whose glorious deeds shall be immortal. We mention but a few in the procession of authors who write to elevate the home. Their name is legion, and we all know them. They are platoons of power in our midst. Let us summon them to our aid. If, through any mistake in the past, our little ones do not know and enjoy the best of friends, let us not be discouraged before the possibilities of the future. Though the transformation cannot be abrupt, let us put good books in their way and elevate the taste. If the young folks only touch a cover, read a title, or criticise a picture, we may hope. Curiosity will deepen into interest, and interest will be transmuted into love. We have considered

how the young lives may be shielded from pernicious reading and environed by the richest thought, through influences which flow into our refined and happy homes. We know how the grand Chautauqua movement unites scores of thousands of readers intent on mental growth. It girdles the globe. It has no sex, no age, no class. Old and young, wise and unwise, the professional scholar and the untrained laborer, all the tired masses, find in its plan a unity of purpose and scope for their multitudinous interests. In its rescue work, it swins out new lines of thought and refreshes the sluggard by a breath of rarified mental air. Not only England and America, but far-away corners of Africa, Australia and New Zealand have links in this chain of thought. It is pre-eminently the privilege of the Aberdeen Society to spread this grand work and forward an intellectual millenium. when the mill-girl, shop-girl, office-boy, teacher and domestic, who catch a few hurried moments from life's duties, will exchange the light story paper and trashy novel for reading of Chautauquan plan and motive. You know your field—the limitless, shelterless prairie. You know the condition—dreary, unbroken solitude. You know the poverty of the large numbers who share it. Can you suddenly transport your bright home to this desolate waste, banish every picture, book and paper which give interest to your life, obliterate every neighborly influence, eliminate the functions of church and society which occupy you here? Can you realize the dismal desolation that would overshadow you? Can you see the listless children hungering for a bit of the rushing world beyond? Can you catch a gleam of the radiancy which illumines the dull home as the longed-for post brings a welcome package from the very heart of life, from your good Aberdeen sisters of distant Winnipeg? The young eyes sparkle at sight of picture and pamphlet, and the little ones browse for days over the pages which have travelled from the great city. A topic of thought and talk has entered the lonely lives. A human hand has reached them across the wide wild moor, and the humane interest is a bit of the heart-love of the universal Father. Your mother eyes grow dim with joy and gratitude, that the favored sisters have remembered you from their abundance. You thank God for the spirit which prompts this systematic philanthropy, for the time and strength devoted to the work. And as you turn the leaves of classic pamphlet, you realize that the noble sisterhood has sent the best that is written. The author's noblest thought uplifts your life in the wilderness and permeates every channel of your household. For this priceless treasure of high thinking, the incense of your prayers ascends that God may further the great work and inspire its workers—that they may relieve the pressing need, and with enthusiasm in their cause and wisdom in their methods, they may be a mighty power in solving the problem of good reading in the prairie home.