

BOOKS IN THEIR SEASONS

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Books in Their Seasons by Annie Russell Marble

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BY

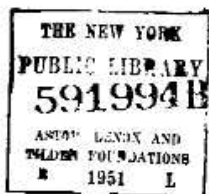
ANNIE RUSSELL MARBLE

"To everything there is a season, and a time to
every purpose under the heaven."

— ECCLESIASTES, iii, 1.

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BOOKS IN THEIR SEASONS

"How many things by season season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection!"

— *Merchant of Venice*, v. 1.

HAVE you had recent occasion to consult the card-catalogue of a large library under the general theme of books? If so, you have noted, with a sense of mental weariness, the scores and scores of books about books, advice under direct and subtle titles on "What to Read," "Books for Ministers of the Gospels," "Books for the Young," and numerous selected lists of "The Best One Hundred Books for General Readers." This abundant and gratuitous counsel on the choice of books is almost equalled by directions "How to Read," "How to Economize Time in Reading," and many sign-boards showing cross-country paths to mental and spiritual culture. Too much advice, however sage, becomes burdensome and often reacts in reckless independence. The inevitable result of so much solicitude regarding *what* and *how* one shall read, so much dogmatism with

scanty allowance for individual tastes and gradual development, has been to arouse a spirit of defiance on the part of many readers towards prescribed rules and approved lists. This resentment against the imperative mood in what should be a pleasure, this disposition to break away from wise doctors and test our own inclinations for a time, has been wittily voiced by Miss Repplicer in revolt at "a list of books of which I dare say I stand in open need, but which I am naturally indisposed to consider with much kindness, thrust upon me as they are, like paregoric or a porous plaster" (*Essays in Miniature*, p. 15).

While there is such a profusion of tracts on the proper books and methods of reading, slight emphasis has been placed upon an equally important thought, — When shall we read certain books, with what environment and mood of humanity, with what seasons of nature will they best affiliate and produce true harmony between author and reader? That mental comrade, so dear to Goldsmith and Thackeray, *The Gentle Reader*, has been revived for our emulation by Dr. Crothers. (*The Gentle Reader*, 1903). We need to renew acquaintance with this genial, sympathetic ideal who ever read for enjoyment, not for percentages of profit, who awakened in his author a feeling of affection, not the

attitude of resentment or cringing apology, which is frequently called forth by the superficial or censorious readers of the present. The Gentle Reader is a delightful model. He is akin to the portraits of the Gentleman and Gentlewoman of the Old School, so happily painted in rhyme by Austin Dobson. The type of reader, however, who is more in accord with the needs and surroundings of present life is The Sane Reader. He may be gentle, he will always aim to be responsive, he must be judicious in both indulgence and self-denial. Nearly two and one-half centuries ago that kindly, wise narrator of "The Worthies of England" (Thomas Fuller, 1662, i. 42) wrote "A Just Complaint of the Numerosity of Needless Books." The Sane Reader to-day, amid the depressing affluence, will first of all apply Carlyle's imagery and separate all books into "Sheep and Goats." Such is only a preliminary process. The "sheep" are so numerous, so tempting in their attractive covers, so varied in their appeals to tastes and moods, that dismay seizes one at the thought of ever reading any large proportion of the worthy books of the past, while "to keep in touch" with current literature suggests a race between a slow pedestrian and an automobile at full speed. Many a college graduate, with innate

love for books, which has not been stifled by the analytic methods of "studying literature," looking over a list of "one hundred books which every one should read," is obliged to confess, if he is perfectly frank, not alone that some of them are unfamiliar to him in their entirety, but also that there are others which he has not the slightest desire to read. Why are we ashamed to confess such conditions? It often happens that the very books which we regarded with indifference or as positive bores in youth or early manhood have become our dear companions in later life. Reading should be regulated by seasons of growth in the outer world and in our inner natures. Was not this the meaning of Emerson, — "The best rule of reading will be a method from nature, and not a mechanical one of hours and pages?"

Leaving out of consideration academic or professional research for the time, and restricting himself to such reading as will conduce to nurture or enjoyment, the sane reader of our vision will choose as carefully *when* to read as *what* to read. He will know when all books should be refused, when mind and nerves may be rested and benefited by abstinence alone. He will await the process of assimilation, he will recognize the claims of other faculties than the mental. Recall the quatrain of Thoreau,

a true lover of books no less than a seer of nature : —

“Tell Shakespeare to attend some leisure hour,
For now I've business with this drop of dew,
And see you not the clouds prepare a shower? —
I'll meet him shortly when the sky is blue.”

The statesman, Charles Fox, said with truth, “Nothing is more delightful than to lie under a tree in summer with a book, except to lie under a tree in summer without a book.” We may carry a magazine or a volume as we saunter along the seashore or sit upon the rocks; but if the sanity of our natures is in full control, reading is neglected as the waves sing around us and the hazy, sail-dotted horizon satisfies and rests the eye and mind as no masterpiece could possibly achieve. We feel annoyance toward our travelling neighbor who so lacks all æsthetic response as to bury himself in a book or a newspaper while we cross grand mountain gorges, are carried through seething river rapids, or within the inlets and expanses of some beautiful lake. Tramping for bird study or in quest of wild flowers, we take a book of information on the first walk but later find it only a burden. Senses and intuitions are our best teachers in the open, and we can verify our limited knowledge and examine minutely our treasures by textual aids in the later indoor hours. Mon-