

**FOUR YEARS OF NOVEL
READING: AN ACCOUNT OF AN
EXPERIMENT IN POPULARIZING
THE STUDY OF FICTION**

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Four Years of Novel Reading: An Account of an Experiment in Popularizing the Study of Fiction
by Richard G. Moulton

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RICHARD G. MOULTON

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FICTION

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INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF FICTION

FICTION may be described at the present time as just succeeding in living down a prejudice. It is now looked upon as a worldly and frivolous thing. But the time has been when it would have been accounted by many to be sinful. Most of us are old enough to recollect the time when a schoolboy would have his stock of story-books confiscated by his teacher, while a schoolgirl might find herself sent to bed for the offence of being caught with a novel. Now our graver moralists go no farther than an affectionate warning: they will not condemn fiction, they will not judge others; but if their young friend wishes to make the best use of his time he will leave novel-reading to the idle, and restrict himself to literature founded on fact. I am afraid that if I were called upon for an affectionate warning, it would run the other way. It is good to make our reading catholic; but if my young friend be straitened in leisure and opportunity, I would counsel him to leave to more fortunate persons the literature that limits itself by fact, and make the best of his time by going straight to the world's great fiction.

If ever there might have been doubt about such counsel, it has ceased to be doubtful in the present day. Our great masters of the novel have been legion: from Miss Edgeworth and Jane Austen to George Eliot, Dickens, Thackeray, Reade, Kingsley, not to speak of the crowd of living novelists, some of whose masterpieces will not yield in rank even to the works of the greatest masters. Of the trinity who make the *Dii Majores* of our modern epoch, Tennyson deals largely with fiction; Browning's way is to weave a fictitious atmosphere about a mere kernel of fact; while William Morris — our English Homer — throws his whole literary message into the form of story. A similar predominance of fiction may be asserted of French and German literatures, so far as those literatures are read outside their native countries. And Russia is being admitted into the circle of great literary powers mainly on the strength of its novels. In such an age of fiction a vow of total abstinence is equivalent to a sentence of excommunication from contact with the best minds.

If we turn to the literature of the past, serious or light, it will appear that universality is more readily obtained by fictitious form than by any other device. The wisdom of primitive life has nearly all perished; that which has been kept alive has for the most part the form of fables and legends. In the great ages, what name is more suggestive of literary dignity than the name of Plato? Yet Plato has presented his whole

philosophy in a fictitious setting, — imaginary dialogues in which the characters, plot, and movement are as carefully elaborated as in an epic or drama. Higher authority yet may be quoted. Of the world's greatest Teacher, the one point of literary form which most impressed his contemporaries was his preference for fiction. "Without a parable spake he not unto them."

Whence, then, has arisen the strong prejudice of our fathers against novels, and the fainter echo of it by our graver moralists of to-day; while those who read fiction half apologize for what they put forward only as a relaxation or venial indulgence?

There is a certain tell-tale phrase that usually comes up in discussions of the subject, — fiction is contemptible because it is all "made up." Has not real life, we are asked, difficulties enough and sorrows of its own, without our needing to waste our tears on manufactured misery, or give precious time to persons and incidents which we know all the time never existed, but have been "made up" by a writer all out of his own head?

Fiction is objectionable, then, because it is "made up." Now, those who object most strongly are profound admirers of physical science. But are not the experiments of the man of science all "made up"? and does not their whole value consist in the fact that they are artificial substitutes of the investigator or expositor for

actualities of nature that could not serve his purpose? We are to be taught the behavior of two gases when they meet. If our teacher is to be limited to the phenomena as they actually are found in nature, he must convey his audience perhaps to the bottom of the sea, or the interior of a floating cloud; when he has got them there the process in question is so intermingled with other processes that none but the trained observer could tell what was going on. Instead of this he "makes up" an experiment. He fetches each of the gases away from all that in actual nature would surround them; he locks them up, most unnaturally, in separate retorts until he is ready; instead of waiting for a real change of weather, he most artificially brings them together by a spark from a manufactured battery; and in an instant a truth is grasped by the simplest student which the cumbrous and involved processes of unassisted nature would have taken years to demonstrate, and even in years demonstrated only to the skilled observer.

Now, fiction is the experimental side of human science. Literature, we know, is the criticism of life. But such branches of literature as history and biography are at a disadvantage, because they must, like the mere observer of physical nature, confine their critical survey to what has actually happened. The poet and novelist can go far beyond this. They can reach the very heart of things by contriving human experiments; setting up,