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‘BOOKS AND READING’

A lecture given at the Royal United Services Institute by F.J. HUDLESTON, Esq., C.B.E., War Office Librarian, on Wednesday, the 26th January, 1927.

I will begin by saying that this winter I have hade three entirely new experiences. Last November, for the first time in my life I addressed an audience. It was a very big and yet very silent audience. I did not hear a single boo or a single laugh Neither had I to dodge rotten eggs or dead cats. As a matter of fact I was broadcasting at the B.B.C. place on Savoy Hill and the apparatus into which I spoke was so stolid and so unresponsive that before I had done I was shaking my fist at it. Perhaps to-night, before I have done, you will feel like shaking your fists at me.

In December, also for the first time in my life, I was a guest at a City Company’s dinner, where by the way, I drank far too much. (This, I may say, was not for the first time in my life). And now to-night I am speaking in the oldest building in Whitehall to an assemblage of people, some of whom are very distinguished, and some of whom if you will permit me to say so, are very charming, and all very intelligent.

I am going to talk to you, I would rather say to chat to you, about books and reading in general. I warn you right here – as they say in America – that I

shall ramble a good deal, for I am by nature a confirmed rambler. But I hope I shall not ramble beyond the pales of Propriety. If I do perhaps our Chairman will recall me to my better self by kindly exclaiming, like Robin Oakapple in Ruddigore, "Basingstoke", or some such other word "replete with hidden meaning".

I shall not, as they were so fond of doing towards the end of the last century, give you a list of the Hundred Best Books; nor shall I, though it would be much more interesting, give you a list of the Hundred Worst Books. In any such later list I think that I should include one or two books that were known in their day as "best sellers", for my experience of "best sellers" is that it is not often the book that is sold as the person who buys the book. The kind of book I have in mind often has some such title as "Memoirs of a Lady of Quality", but when you have read it you will find that it ought really be called "Memoirs of a Lady of No Particular Quality".

Of course we do not get many books of this class in the War Office Library; though I might mention, in this connection, that some years ago we took in for the Director of Military Intelligence a periodical of which some of you may have heard, called "La Vie Parisienne". That pernickety old Stationary Office rather jibbed at this, but the subscription was justified by me on the grounds – which certainly cannot be gainsaid – that the paper in question, and in particular the illustrations that adorn it, "showed the trend of Continental thought". Although I am no artist I should like to add "Very nice, too".

There are, of course, many kinds of books. The poet, Tom Moore – he was, from his portraits, such a pleasant, genial little man that one cannot possibly call him Thomas – well, Tom Moore once wrote of what he regarded as a mis-spent youth:

> My only books
> Were woman's looks
> And folly's all they've taught me.

I disagree with Tom entirely. I am sure this is a book which all men study – I know I do – with the greatest interest. I think I might say, all women as well as men, though I rather fancy, of course I am not sure, but I have a kind of hazy, nebulous notion, that some ladies prefer to study this particular book long, and earnestly, and frequently in a looking glass.

The taste for books and reading has been much fostered by public libraries, and those who borrow books from public libraries do not borrow

novels only. I was in one, a public library, not a novel, quite recently. I observed two young girls called, I gathered from their conversation, Gladys and Maudie. Gladys, I may say, was a very polite young woman. Having occasion to pass between me and the bookshelf at which I was looking, she did so with a graceful, almost old-world, apology, "I ask your pardon, Dad". I am glad to say I happened to know the right answer in Gladysian circles, and that is "Granted". I wondered what books they were going to choose. I was amazed and delighted to hear Gladys draw Maudie's attention to Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" with the high praise that it was a "topping pome", as she put it. But I was less delighted when she added, "It's all about a chap with a skinny hand". This, I fear, would not have pleased Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who took himself very seriously, but I am sure that it would have pleased his friend Charles Lamb who used to take an impish delight in chaffing the great opium-eater. But Gladys was no worse than a Mr. Dorman, who, in a "History of the British Empire in the Nineteenth Century", in his chapter on literature, complains that "The Ancient Mariner" has neither meaning nor moral, and asks indignantly, "Why should the Wedding Guest have been delayed?" I do not think that I have seen a more foolish, fatuous and imbecile criticism of a great poem. This Mr. Dorman wrote another book called "Ignorance", and I think that he must have been well qualified to do so. I expect that you have all read "The Ancient Mariner", if not, please do so at the earliest opportunity, for I am sure that, like Gladys, you will find it "topping". Moreover, in spite of the preposterous Dorman, there <u>is</u> a moral in it. You will learn how unwise it is, should you on your way to, or from, the War Office, meet an Albatross, to shoot it with your crossbow. There is always a close time for Albatrosses. And then you might turn to the same poet's "Kubla Khan", which begins:

> In Xanadu, did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree
> Where Alph the Sacred River ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea

If you ask me where Xanadu is, I must refer you to the Geographical Section of the General Staff, and if they don't know I am quite sure they will ask the Librarian. An odd thing about this poem is that Coleridge dreamt it. When he awoke he began to write it down and had finished some 50 lines when he was told, "A Person from Porlock wishes to see you". The remainder of the poem went out of his head, and the Person from Porlock has achieved an odd kind of immortality. I rather wonder that the man Dorman did not say that he regretted that Coleridge should have given his Sacred River the vulgar, Cockney name of Alf; though of course Alfred would not have scanned. But great poets can do

this kind of thing. Some of you may remember that Wordsworth actually begins one of his sonnets with the appalling line:

"Jones! When from Calais southward you and I …"

(By the way if there are any Jones's present I must apologise. It may not be a poetical name, but many famous people have borne it. For instance there was Tom Jones, and Davy Jones, and there is that living hero Stanley Horace Sitwell-Jones, with a hyphen, the only man in Upper-Tooting who has never used the phrase "that's right". And in the Victorian era there was that gallant and humane soldier who was so dissatisfied with the Forage Allowance laid down by the Q.M.G.6. Branch of the day that he took the matter into his own hands. Some of you may be old enough to remember a popular ballad that was written about him – I hope the R.U.S.I. possesses a copy. It began:

> Captain Jones of the Horse Marines
> Fed his horse on corn and beans
> Which, surely, far exceeds the means
> Of a Captain in the Army.

There is no regiment of Horse Marines now in the Army List. Which is a pity, as England is so often engaged in what the strategists call Amphibious Warfare. Personally I like the name Jones so much that when my only child, a daughter, was going to be christened I wanted her to be called Jones. It was pointed out to me that this was not a girl's name. So I compromised, dropped the final "s", and she was christened Joan.

I do not want this to be too serious a lecture, and I have a note here "If no ladies present, tell them the story of Lord Curzon and the Education of the Masses". I see and am very glad to see that ladies are present, so we must give Lord Curzon a miss, and if you want to hear the story you must come and see me later. Instead I will tell you an anecdote of a Ciceronian and De Senectute nature about myself.

You will all of you, even the youngest of you, sooner or later grow old. Women of course take much longer to grow old than men: it is one of their privileges. It cannot be said of them anni labuntur. So far as men are concerned the thought of old age is as Cousin Feenix says in Dombey and son "a devilish disagreeable reflection for a man". You may either realise it gradually, or it may be brought home to you with a bump. The later was my case. Some years ago, after a strenuous day's golf at Sandy lodge, I was sitting in the Refreshment room at Marylebone Railway Station, refreshing myself with, I think, a cup of tea. At the same table was a country woman also drinking tea, with a baby on

her knee. The baby, I gathered, had just been drinking, well, what babies generally do drink. Now I am very fond of children, including babies, so I twiddled my fingers at this one in a friendly manner. The babe, to use a phrase which always seems to me to smack of parliament, "took notice" and responded with a bubbly smile: you know the kind of thing I mean, rather more bubble than smile. It also observed Gug – Gug – Gug – Gar, or words to that effect. The mother, remarking this, inquired in a loud voice of the world in general, "Who's a rogue?' I hope that I need not assure those of you who know me that she didn't mean me – I had never set eyes on her before. She then turned to her infant and, indicating me said, in a louder voice "Why Precious, that ain't Gran-pa". And when I thought of Gran-Pa, probably some lean slippered old pantaloon in a smock-frock tending his sheep on the Grampians or the Chilterns, I, as this good lady would have said "came over queer" so much so that I rose to my feet, and in the beautiful phrase of Lord Tennyson, I "approached the bar", and in a faint voice asked the bar-maids for another bottle of tea.

I believe these lectures are instructional. I am not quite sure what lesson you will learn from this anecdote except perhaps the maxim "Twiddle not thy fingers at strange babes".

A propos to old age you will remember that the Greeks had a proverb "Those whom the Gods love die young". I believe this means that they do not grow old in spirit but always remain young at heart. I do not suppose that the Greek Gods are likely to take any particular interest in any of you – please observe that I say nothing about goddesses, whether ancient or modern – but I do most certainly believe that as one grows older in years, it is quite easy if you have a sense of fun not to grow old in spirit. Another way and a very pleasant way, to remain young is to cultivate the society of young people, especially if you are a man, young women. "Honi soit qui mal y pense", which is, as you know the motto of the Garter, or perhaps as ladies are present I should be more delicate and say the Suspender. Anyway the point I wish to make is this: that the companionship, the daily companionship, of young people will prevent you as you grow old from becoming a Snarley-Yow or a Grouch. But I fear I am drifting into the sentiments and language of the pulpit.

I mentioned just now cousin Feenix in Dombey and Son. Some people chiefly those horrible folk known as Highbrows, are apt to say that Dickens could not draw a gentleman. If ever you hear anybody say this please mention Cousin Feenix, who is as true and as perfect a gentleman as any character created by that Prince of Snobs – Thackeray. Cousin Feenix is also a fine example of the art of Charles Dickens. He is quite a minor character and does

not appear very often or say very much, yet you get a wonderful miniature portrait of him, and can realise exactly what he was like in looks and in nature.

I suppose most of you know of, if you have not read, the standard history books, those books which in the booksellers' phrase "no gentleman's library should be without", but which I fear nowadays few gentlemen read. They Prefer Blondes. Of these standard histories I think the best reading is Macaulay, though I believe he is not in fashion at present. I love to read Macaulay though I hate him personally for two reasons. Firstly, because he was "a vile Whig", and secondly because he was very rude about a member of my family, Father John Hudleston, who not only helped Charles II on his death-bed, just around the corner here, into the Roman Catholic Church, but also helped him out of the oak-tree at Boscobel, after the Battle of Worcester. On this occasion Prince Charles gave him, no doubt with a courtly "that's for remembrance" a "bloody clout". Perhaps I should explain that at this date this meant not a violent blow, but a blood-stained tattered rag.

A very pleasant way of acquiring history is to take it in the form of Diaries, Memoirs and Letters. Of course the Diary of Diaries is that of Samuel Pepys. You should all of you be particularly interested in Samuel for he was a Civil Servant, and a very efficient Civil Servant, and also because he was always a good deal about the Palace of Whitehall, on parts of which the War Office stands. Indeed I like to think that the War Office occupies the very site where one fine day in 1662 Samuel records that he saw "the finest smocks and linen petticoats of My Lady Castlemaine" hung out to dry. He adds "It did me good". I think that all of you who have reached years of indiscretion will quite see his point of view. I am not sure if the War Office has a secret back staircase or not. If it has I think it is very likely to be haunted by the ghosts of Pretty Nelly Gwynne and the other ladies who used to come late at night to commune with Old Rowley. Perhaps the Resident Clerks could tell us if they have ever seen these dear little apparitions flitting along the corridors. But I warn them not to dally with "His Late Majesty's Miss" as I once saw Nelly described in an old book. For, even though a ghost, she would probably say, as she really did once say in a play "Hold! Let me be! You damn confounded dog."

The correspondence of that scandal-mongering old woman Horace Walpole tells you a lot about his period which you will not find in the serious history books, how the great men of the day drank, gambled, and swore and "talked bawdy" as they put it. They remind me of a musical comedy I saw in the nineties in which a butler had a song about late Victorian High Life. One stanza read something like this:

These Dukes and Earls
They talk about girls
And when they're smoking
I hear 'em joking
Of goings-on such as is
Not with their Dxxxx *(word missed – David Hyde)*

In these hard days when one's salary can only be described as Nil nisi bonus, I imagine if Dukes and Earls get to talking about Girls it is probably to say what great difficulty they have in paying the wages of the tweeny-maid.

But you will see in Walpole's pages what great and reckless admirers Ministers of State then were of what used to be called the Fair Sex. That sex still remains fair: Ministers no doubt have changed. And I suppose one ought to say "a good thing too."

I am at present engaged in my spare time in writing a life of Gentleman Johnny, or Handsome Jack, that is to say the unfortunate General John Burgoyne. And the more I read of the Ministers of his day, the more entertained I am. A great, or comparatively great poet, once wrote:

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime."

From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step, and there is something delightfully ridiculous in the careers of many of the corrupt peers who helped to govern England at this date. One of these beauties was Lord Sandwich who administers the Admiralty. He was generally known as Jeremy Twitcher, for this reason He had been a boon companion of Jack Wilkes but when the latter's scandalous poem "The Essay on Woman" got him into trouble, Sandwich denounced him publicly. "That night" as they say at the Movies, the Beggar's Opera happened to be played in town, and when Macheath came to the line "That Jeremy Twitcher should peach I own surprises me". There were loud shouts of "Lord Sandwich", and the nick-name stuck to him, It was said of him that he was:

Too infamous to have a friend
Too bad for bad men to commend.

Another beauty was Lord George Germain who managed, or rather mismanaged, the American and War Department.

He had been broke for cowardice at Minden, and lost us the American Colonies because he wanted to spend a week-end in Sussex, though I am afraid that a kind of official ancestor of Sir Herbert Creedy's, the Deputy Secretary, must share the blame. Nothing good can be said of Germaine, but we should be grateful for one thing to Lord Sandwich. On one occasion he refused to leave the gaming table for dinner, and called for a slice of meat between two slices of bread – a species of light refreshment which took its name from him. He is also famous from the fact that his mistress, Miss Ray, whom he kept in his official residence in Whitehall, where she acted as hostess, was murdered while she was leaving a theatre, by a clergyman, James Hackman, who was in love with her – an odd way of showing his affection. The murderer, by the way, had originally been a captain in the Army.

The Diary and Letters of Miss Fanny Burney, afterwards Madame D'Arblay, are also of great interest for this period, that is to say the late eighteenth century. Probably most of you have read her delightful novel "Evelina". This was the first book to be written in England, at all events in England, to be an enormous success, for Mrs Aphra Behn's novels and plays of the cheerful, Rabelaisian Restoration Age, that Golden Age, were only a Succès de scandale, and they certainly are very scandalous. You can guess what her plays are like from the couplet in which Pope, who calls her Astrea, sums her up:

"The stage how lightly doth Astrea tread
Who fairly puts all characters to bed."

She was, by the way, buried in Westminster Abbey, but Pope's lines do not appear there as her epitaph. All of you will be interested to hear that this excellent woman, this benefactress of Britons, introduced milk punch into England: and some of you may like to know that she was a very efficient member of Charles II's Secret Service.

Not long ago I had the, to me, very pleasant task of blackening the moral character of that Secretary of Hell, as I believe he was called in his day, by those who disliked him, Oliver Cromwell. With the help of Mrs. Behn and some old ballads at the British Museum, I flatter myself I made his moral character appear as warty as his "damned disinheriting countenance". It was a labour of love and I was more than repaid for my trouble when I heard that a most distinguished Civil Servant in the War Office, when he happened to see an indictment of Old Noll and my account of his goings-on with Mrs. Lambert, and other "doxies" as they called one's lady friends in that day, observed "Well, no wonder they called him The Great Protector". And though it is unpleasantly, not

to say dangerously, near the end of the month, I would give a fiver – probably a borrowed fiver – to have thought of that myself.

To return to letter-writers, there are two of whom I am very fond. One is Cowper or Cooper – I don't know which is the right pronunciation – and the other is Charles Lamb. Cowper was a very sensitive soul. He was nominated for a clerkship in the House of Lords, but a prospect of an examination, a purely formal examination, was too much for him, and he went off his head, for the time being. Lucky for him he did not live nowadays, though I suppose soon it will be possible to be inoculated against nervousness. I once wrote an epigram on Cowper of which I am rather proud. I have waited for years for an opportunity to let it off – as an impromptu – but without success. So I am going to inflict it upon you now. As Sir Benjamin Backbite said before he recounted his epigram about Lady Betty Curricule's ponies "You should be acquainted with the circumstances".

I must therefore remind you that one of Cowper's poems is called "The Sofa" and also that the early death of John Keats is said to have been hastened by an unkind review of his poems. Well, here is my effort:

> That tender spirit Keats expired because the
> Quarterly his poems spat upon;
>
> And yet far more tender Cowper did not mind
> his "Sofa" being sat upon.

I, personally, think that Charles Lamb's letters are better reading than his essays. His life was over-shadowed by the tragedy of the ever-recurring madness of his sister, but his letters are full of fun and leg-pulling as we call it. My only regret about Lamb is that he was not in the War Office instead of the India House, which became the India Office. Of course he was very unlike a modern Civil Servant for, as you will remember, he made up for being very unpunctual in arriving in the morning by very punctual in leaving in the evening. Also, he drank too much: he acted up to the old French saying "Il faut chaque mois, Du moins s'enivrer une fois": that is to say "It is the duty of every man at least once a month to get drunk". Which, with whisky at its present price, and beer at its present strength, or rather weakness, can only be described as a counsel of perfection. To get into this deplorable condition nowadays is – fortunately or unfortunately – in the words of Shakespeare, not only a matter of toil and trouble, but also and most emphatically so, one of Double, Double. And Doubles are so expensive.

Lamb's letters would be almost my first choice for a list of Bedside Books, though I imagine everybody would have different books for this list. I remember many years ago discussing this question with a very charming, pretty and slightly pious young lady. She said that her first choice for a bedside book would be a devotional work, I think it is a kind of anthology, called "A Cloud of Witnesses". And when I said, meaning to be pleasant, that I should very much like to be one of them she got quite cross. I tried to mend matters by saying that of course I would prefer to be a solitary witness instead of one of a Cloud or crowd, and then she got crosser.

I mentioned Shakespeare just now. I suppose it is high treason to say so but I am inclined to think that honest old George III was not far wrong when he said "There is sad stuff in Shakespeare, though one must not say so. What, What?" I think that most of us rather see Shakespeare acted than read him, though we may not all agree as to the merits of Shakespearean actors. For example, the late Sir Herbert Tree's Hamlet was applauded by many, yet W.S. Gilbert when asked by Tree what he thought of it, replied it was "funny without being vulgar". Gilbert, though he got his living by the stage, was a severe critic of it. He said of another actor, then more famous for his perspiring energy than his art, "He can't act but his pores certainly do". I will now leave the shade of the spreading chestnut tree and return to Shakespeare.

Perhaps some of you are Baconians and believe that Bacon wrote all the plays generally attributed to Shakespeare, and that it was he who, as they would say in the United States, put the ham into Hamlet? Well, I don't, and, frankly, I think that the Bacon theory is all gammon. I do not mean to say that an ex-Lord Chancellor could not have written as well as Shakespeare: there is a very talented one living now who, I daresay, could if he tried. William Wordsworth once said in Lamb's presence – I always seem to be harking back to Charles – that he (Wordsworth) could write as well as Shakespeare "If he had the mind". Lamb agreed with him – only the mind was lacking.

There is one dramatist – an eighteenth century dramatist – whose plays I can and do read over and over again. I mean that witty Irishman R.B. Sheridan: I have already quoted him, for Sir Benjamin Backbite was one of his creations. Sir Lucius O'Trigger, Mrs. Malaprop, Lady Teazle and her husband, Sir Peter, Charles Surface, Mr Puff, Lord Foppington, Miss Hoyden and the rest of them, all are most delightful creatures, and if any of you haven't made their acquaintance I think that I shall not have spoken in vain tonight if I can persuade you to do so. I am not sure that my favourite isn't Lord Foppington in "A trip to Scarborough", which is really an adaptation of Vanburgh's comedy "The Relapse". This, by the way, is so scandalously indelicate that I think the

examiner of plays of the present day, if it were submitted to him, would have something worse than a relapse, probably a series of fits. To prevent a rush early tomorrow morning to room 0045 in the War Office, I must add that there is not a copy in the Library.

There is a remark of Lord Foppington's which makes me smile every time I think of it. A lady asks him if he is fond of music. He replies "Oh, passionately so – on Tuesdays and Saturdays, for then there is always the best company at the Opera and one is not expected to undergo the fatigue of listening". When there is an Opera Season in town nowadays, I think this is the attitude of many people who patronise it, though they are not so honest as Lord Foppington. Some go to show their jewels, others to look at them. Perhaps some of you do not know that it was Sheridan who wrote the often-quoted couplet, which contains a great truth:

> You write with ease to show your breeding
> But easy writing's curst hard reading.

But I am sure all of you know, and I daresay most of you have sung Sir Harry Bumper's delightful song beginning –

> Here's to the maiden of bashful fifteen,
> Here's to the widow of fifty.
> Here's to the flaunting, extravagant quean
> And here's to the house-wife that's thrifty.

I should explain that "quean", spelt q-u-e-a-n means a hussy. This is important because George III's consort, Queen Charlotte, was not extravagant, certainly not flaunting – unlike that unfortunate royal Slapcabbage, her daughter-in-law, Caroline.

I seem to have confined myself mostly to eighteenth century books, the reason being, I suppose, that it is my favourite century. If time did not exist, as some philosophers, and all plumbers, seem to think, I would rather step into the eighteenth century than any other. And yet I have left out about the best book of that day, Boswell's Johnson, the finest life ever written, or ever likely to be written. This is a book to be kept handy, to be dipped into. I will just quote two stories from it, one showing the Doctor's extraordinary common-sense, the other his John Bullishness. The first is this. "a gentleman in company" – this always means Boswell – asked Dr. Johnson "Pray, sir, what would you do if you found yourself alone in a castle with a new-born babe?" "Why, sir" replied the Doctor "I should not much like my company". The other story is as follows. Johnson was suffering from a violent toothache and a polite Frenchman,

sympathising with him, said in French "Ah, Sir, you study too much". Johnson's savage comment was, and I do not think one can blame him "For anything I can see theses foreigners are fools". This has always been John Bull's opinion in the past, and I am really doubtful if even the European War shook it out of him.

But as most Foreigners regard us English as mad, we are, as they say at golf, "all square". I must apologise for saying "us English" instead of British. I daresay there are present some Caledonians, stern and wild, and I know, look you, that there is at least one Welshman here. And if you don't like this lecture you must take it out of him, not me, as he asked me to give it, whateffer.

As a matter of fact I think that we do behave rather oddly on the Continent. I will tell you an anecdote illustrating this. An old friend of mine, who asseverated that he could "speak French like a native" landed, some years ago – before the war – at Boulogne; made his way to a hotel and forthwith went to his bedroom to recover from sea-sickness. Feeling in due course better, he thought he would like a cup of tea, which in itself was very odd because he generally drank Whisky and Soda. He rang the bell and a knock came at the door. "Entrez", he cried, and here his French broke down and he added "Moi, I desire a cup of tea". "Pardon, Monsieur?" said the waiter. And my friend, who could speak French like a native, replied "For God's sake don't stand arguing there like that: bring me a cup of tea and look sharp about it."

When he related this episode to me I told him that he had seriously damaged the Entente Cordiale. The word "Cordiale" reminded him of Cherry Brandy, so we immediately had some. And cherry brandy reminds me of Mr. Pickwick, so let us get back to books.

Now Pickwick is a book which I read right through at least once a year; my copy is all rags and tatters. To me it is a kind of literary Shibboleth. If a young man says to me that he cannot read Pickwick, I urge him to mend his ways before it be too late. And if a middle-aged man says the same thing, I regard him as Voltaire said of Habakkuk, as being "capable de tout": I suspect him of parricide, or even worse, teetotalism. One of the greatest charms of Pickwick to my mind is there is no trace in it of the sentimentalism which figures in, I think disfigures, some other of Dickens' works. One cannot, for instance, even faintly imagine what Mr. Winkle or Mr. Snodgrass would have found to say to Little Nell. I am afraid Tracy Tupman would have made eyes at her. And yet a sentimental story has enormous appeal, and also an enormous sale. I have two books in my mind. One is East Lynne, one of the most popular books ever written. It was published in 1861 and I believe even now not a week passes without the play, which was based on it, being performed somewhere or

other in Great Britain. This play is known in theatrical circles as "When in doubt" from the old stage proverb "when in doubt put on East Lynne": for, like Phyllis in the old ballad, it "never fails to please". The other book I have in mind is I think absolutely the worst best seller ever perpetrated. It is pure sentiment and yet – you would hardly believe it – it deals with life in a Calvary Regiment. Mr. Ruskin said that it was the best book about life in the army that he had ever read. I imagine he knew as much about this subject as I – or you – do of life in an Eastern Harim: I believe this is the right pronunciation, which is a pity as harem rhymes with scare 'em, wear 'em, and also tear 'em. The book in question is called "Bootle's Baby" and it ought to have a sub-title "Unadulterated Tosh". The beginning of this ghastly tale is typical of the whole. A young unmarried cavalry officer finds one night deposited in his quarters an anonymous babe. This, I think, is unlikely. And the baby does not prove to be his. I will leave it to you to decide for yourself whether, at this date, about 1880, this was unlikely or not. The only comic relief, and that is unintentional, is furnished by the illustrations. One of these represents the Officer's Mess entertaining a General at lunch. Bootle's Baby, is, of course, sitting on the General's knee. As that great man whom I have just mentioned, John Ruskin, once I believe observed "Every picture tells a story": from the very uneasy look on the General's face, I rather think that the baby has just, well, forgotten its manners – and been sick. I hope that none of you will find yourselves in a similar predicament. If you do, for Heaven's sake don't say what one so often does say of little girl babies – I have often said it myself, and that is "Bless me, how like its mother". In any case, Bootle's Baby would stand nulli secundus, or rather secunda as it was a girl, on my List of the Hundred Worst Books. And yet if any of you could write a book so bad you would probably be able to accelerate the flow of promotion by retiring, and there would be interviews with you in popular magazines, with illustrations, such as Mr. Soanso, author of that masterpiece "Bilge", playing with his pet Alsatians, Pongo and Prunella: Mrs. Soanso with a tooth-powder advertisement smile, hemstitching her husband's pyjamas: penholder, originally the property of H.M. Stationary Office, with which "Bilge" was written, and so on, and so forth.

Before ending I ought perhaps to say something about how one should read. In the first place it is as well not to hold the book upside down. I mention this, because during the War, our present Director of Establishments allotted to me as an Assistant in the Library, a very talented young lady who possessed this odd gift. I did not encourage it, in fact I frowned upon it. I told her that it reminded me of witches who, as you all know, repeat the Lord's Prayer – when they <u>do</u> repeat it- backwards. Besides it might have led to her, when she was looking for some book on the top of a ladder, standing on her head, which would have been dangerous for her, and embarrassing for others. As a matter of

fact she did once fall off a ladder, and I remember there came into my mind the first verse I learnt in my life – I expect that you all know it -

"Who ran to help me when I fell
And would some pretty story tell
And kiss the place to make it well?"
Well, I could.

As a Librarian, I have in my time, read so many books that I flatter myself that I can tear the heart out of a book, that is to say get the gist of it as quickly as most people, except of course reviewers who, it is notorious, only read the preface and the last page. You cannot possibly remember all that you read, so it is as well to make notes, either in a common-place book, or on cards. I have kept for many years such an index in which I have noted odd and out-of-the-way items of information. Just the other day I was showing this Index, with some pride, to the Deputy Under Secretary and, rather like those talented gentlemen who implore you to "find the lady", I drew a card at random. I am sorry to say it happened to be headed "Swearing, Instances of among Soldiers". But, as the D.U.S. said, the entries might prove useful as furnishing precedents for – well I won't say which branch of the War Office.

Supposing, now, I were to come across what Mr Gladstone really <u>did</u> say in 1882, even if it were only "Please pass the port", or "The days appear to be drawing in", down it would go on my index. Similarly, with that famous anecdote which, told by a tactless courtier, caused Queen Victoria to remark "We are not amused". If you want to know more about this card index you should read a book called "Warriors in Undress". "Sweet are the uses of advertisement" as some poet has remarked so I will add that you can but it for half a guinea – or borrow it from some library. Some things of course stick in one's memory and need not be written down. For example I remember very well how, according to an Old Belgian peasant, Napoleon spent the night before Waterloo. It is only an oral tradition, handed down from grandfather, or in this case grandmother to grandson, and I do not propose to tell it to you. For I abhor scandal, insinuendoes I detest, in short I hope that I may say Pudicity is my middle name. By the way I should like to say that I myself invented, many years ago, the word "insinuendo": it means of course a mixture of insinuation and innuendo. I saw it used quite recently in a newspaper, and I hope that one day it may appear in a Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary. Anyway, I think it is as good a word as that <u>blessed</u> word "mechanization".

You should also, when reading, treat books kindly. I have had books returned to the War Office Library which the borrower had apparently read and dropped in his – or her – bath. I mean of course he had dropped it in his bath, or

she had dropped it in her bath. I have also had sent back to me dictionaries which look as though they have been used, not as works of reference, not for the solution of crossword puzzles, but in experiments in Interior – that is to say domestic – Ballistics. I was going to say, do not mark the page where you have left off by inserting a hair-pin, but I imagine hair pins are not made nowadays, England being at present not so much a Land of Hope and Glory as a Land of Bobs and Shingles. Which is a pity as hair pins made such excellent pipe cleaners. Do not write "rot" or "bosh" or "fool" in the margin when you disagree with the author's views. On the other hand MS notes by people who really know are of the greatest value. There is in the War Office Library a life of Gordon annotated by an officer – he is now a Major General on the retired list – who took part in the Gordon Relief Expedition. He gives, in pencil, the real reason for Charles Wilson's delay in pressing on by steamer to Khartoum. I am afraid that I cannot quote it textually here, and I cannot imagine that it will ever appear in any history book, but it is of extraordinary interest. I think that I may this much without offence. Just as if Helen had a permanent squint instead of a permanent wave, or had a crooked nose, there would have been no siege of Troy, so if Lord Charles Beresford, who was with Sir Charles Wilson, had not been suffering from boils, perhaps Gordon would have been saved. Though whether it would have been possible to persuade him to leave Khartoum, is another matter.

I would also beg you to refrain from reading books when you are eating muffins: you may leave behind on the page finger-prints, which perhaps some day – who knows? – may be of peculiar interest to, and treasured carefully at, Scotland Yard. Besides, which is more important, it is bad for the books.

An obscure dramatist, a certain John Tobin, wrote in a long forgotten play called "The Honeymoon" the immortal lines:

> The man who lays his hand upon a woman,
> Save in the way of kindness, is a Wretch.

I believe as a matter of fact even when he does it in the way of kindness, he is, under certain circumstances, guilty of a technical assault. One might put it in verse:

> The furtive pinch, the surreptitious touch
> Are technical assaults, and fined as such.

But on second thoughts I do not think that I will read the couplet I have here in my typescript, lest I be Basingstoked by you all.

The point I want to make is that you should treat books as, according to Mr. Tobin, you should treat women, and also, according to Isaac Walton, if you are a Compleat Angler, worms, that is to say as if you loved them. The man who tears a page out of a book is a wretch and a ruffian who deserves to be condemned to read for the rest of his life nothing except the novels of well, let us say the late Miss Carrie Morelli. If you lose your temper in the domestic circle, please do not throw a book at a cat, or your wife, or the twins, or your partner at Bridge, or whoever it may be that has annoyed you – a lump of coal or a tea-pot is much more effective.

To end in a more serious vein, I should like to say that there is one book of which you all, I am sure, possess a copy, or if you do not, at all events you have access to a copy. Though I have never read this book right through from cover to cover, I do not mind confessing that, when in doubt or anxiety as to what course to take, I always refer to it. I think that if you obey the injunctions in this book, and follow the line of conduct therein indicated, you will in your later years be able to say that at all events, you have done your best.

I need scarcely say, for all of you must have guessed, that the book I have in my mind is "Office Instructions for the Guidance of all War Office Staff".