

## BORED AND ENTRANCED

### A Parable \*

A FEW years ago I travelled from Montreal to Quebec in a Pullman car which, strange to say, never contained more than three passengers till we reached our destination. Opposite me sat a McGill girl—a junior I inferred from her conversation with two other girls who were seeing her off. On the other side of the aisle sat a young man, one of those handsome, perfectly well-tailored youths, so attractive that you are willing to ascribe genius to them as well as a host of minor perfections. This demi-god was reading. The McGill girl looked across at him for some time, till their eyes met. 'Reading?' she half queried, after an interval of mute presentation leading to a simultaneous smile. 'Yes,' a very uncultivated voice answered, 'what I want is a love story with a kid in it and lots of devilry in him.' The book was handed across the aisle, and the girl began to read. The voice had been an anti-climax, and so evidently was the book, yet the girl read on, skimming and skipping. After a while my conscience smote me, and, bending over the love-and-kid-story, I whispered: 'Have you ever read *Vanity Fair*?' The girl looked up, flushed a little, and answered: 'Dickens?' 'No,' I said, 'Thack——' 'Oh! Thackeray, of course! No, it was not on our list.'

What would I not have given to have *Vanity Fair* in my valise, open it at random, and watch the girl's delight at Becky Sharp's introduction to Sir Pitt's town house and to his immortal charwoman!

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## *Bored and Entranced*

'You never read *Vanity Fair*, which is a wonderfully interesting book?' I said, 'and you waste an hour on a love-and-kid-story which bores you to death.'

The girl certainly was bored to death, but she was not convinced. As long as masterpieces appear as books 'which are on our list,' trash is sure to be preferred. Better be bored by it than excited by great books.

Assignments, examination papers, and the commentaries of pedants are largely responsible for this. For the moment a great book is not supposed to be one, it recovers at once its original value as entrancing reading.

Another train incident once gave me a tangible proof of this fact. I was in the Paris to Orleans train. Opposite me an intelligent looking but countrified man was sorting papers. In the corner, on my side of the compartment, his little daughter, a child of twelve, dressed in black, was reading a square little book, also habited in black canvas by some amateur bookbinder. I never saw anybody read like that. It seemed as if the old-fashioned but pretty and dainty little figure were trying to lose itself into that book. In time my curiosity about a book that could be read with such intensity became irresistible. I made a brief feint of talking with the father, and then suddenly turned to the little girl, and asked: 'What are you reading so delightedly?' The eager little face looked up, summoned, as it were, from far-away regions. '*Monsieur c'est l'Histoire Romaine*' (brief pause), '*et je vais arriver à Jules César!*' 'How do you know you are coming to Julius Caesar?' '*Oh! I have read this book many times.*'

I have never forgotten the emphasis on: '*et je vais arriver à Jules César!*' No prospect of Christmas, or a degree, or a first trip to Paris ever produced

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emphasis of that quality. I visualised the background in an instant: a farm on the windy plain of wheat-fields between long strips of grape vines, the *salle* with its big mantelpiece; on the side ledge of this, below the ancestral powder-horns, the tiny library of three or four musty prayer-books, a gardening book, a cookery book, a surveyor's manual, a Family Lawyer, a Larousse *Dictionary*, a few old almanacks, and in the far-away corner the little black canvas *Histoire Romaine*. In a modern library of fiction or magazines the square squat volume would have been as forbidding to a child as a black old monk. Next to the lawyer's or surveyor's stuff, Roman History resumed its glamour, and Julius Caesar became once more the romantic hero he was during so many centuries. Owing to an incredible chance, the little girl summed up in herself the dreams, the yearnings, and admirations of princesses. No wonder she looked distinguished.

This is what classics do when they are not killed by those who teach them, or, above all, when they are not juxtaposed to trash sure to make them look like the brown bread of Auvergne as compared to cheap sweets. None of the inferior stuff to which our children are treated, while we look on powerless, ever can give them the feeling of elation, nay, the amusement, which great books naturally produce.

(From *The Art of Thinking* by Ernest Dimnet.)