

THE BOOKMAN

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RUTH UNIVERSAL

THE THIRD OF A SERIES OF FIVE OPEN LETTERS

by Branch Cabell

YOUR letter informs me that your class in English is studying modern authors; and, through a sequence not wholly apparent, is offering a prize for the best scrapbook. You would therefore, upon the ground that you have heard my stories are very interesting, consider it a great favour if I should send you full information concerning myself, my books, and what you comprehensively indicate as "incidents in my life", along with my picture, my book-plate, and my signature. You believe that if I help you in this way you will be certain to win the prize. Your name is Ruth; you are thirteen years old; you write upon robin's egg blue paper with gilt edges; and you are a member of the Sophomore Class in an Indianian high-school.

Along with your letter, as it happens, I have also a letter from Millicent, who is a Junior in a Californian high-school. In order to pass her English course Millicent has to complete a project (whatever that may mean) pertaining to my books. She directs me to help her by telling as much as I have time to write in a letter, which, she stipulates, must be signed by me personally, about myself, my life, my publishings, and what authors have most influenced me, "sending all material along that line", and any pictures of my home and of me which would aid Millicent in illustrating her scrapbook. "She directs", I say: for Millicent's tone is void of shilly-shallying: I imagine she is related to

the county tax-collector, or perhaps to the sheriff, and has observed fondly the epistolary manner of her kinsman.

Well, and yesterday I had a similar letter from Jerome, who attends a high-school on Long Island; the day before yesterday I received virtually the same letter from Edward, who is in his second year at high-school in Chicago; and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, even until next May, I shall find in my morning's mail just such letters from yet other schoolchildren.

My dear Ruth, you and your compeers have thus become an infernal nuisance. It would in some aspects be pleasant enough to devote the remainder of my life on earth to compiling amply illustrated monographs about myself, for you and Millicent and Jerome and Edward and all the others; but second thought suggests that such daily employment would hardly prove self-supporting. I am thus urged to refuse you by commonsense: to the other side, I am not able, with any comfort, to deny the request of a child, howsoever inordinate.

So I am sending you my book-plate, and a photograph which I regret to say is a faithful likeness, and a long list of the books I have published, and a charitably brief pamphlet that will tell you quite enough about these books to forestall any need of your trying to read them.

But you ask also that I tell you about the author of these books. You have thus set for

me a theme concerning which my views are both biased and limited by the merciful dictates of human vanity. Yet I willingly record for you, rash child, the thoughts which occur to me when I think frankly about myself.

ONCE delighted in the romances of William Harrison Ainsworth, particularly in *Crichton*. I remember when cows went at their own free will about the streets of Richmond, which city has now an estimated population of 182,929 human beings, in addition to Ellen Glasgow and John Powell and myself. Once and a while I wonder who wrote the three children's books about Tim Pippin (the giant-killer, the beloved of Princess Primrose), and if these books are still procurable anywhere? I am fond of mushrooms prepared in any fashion, but I find them least appetizing when cooked with a cream sauce. When I buy a pair of garters (of the double-grip variety) and the salesman asks me what colour I prefer, I cannot imagine what difference the colour of his garters can make to any man.

During the World War I served my country by designing the coat-of-arms of the Eightieth Division. I have never played golf nor indulged in any form of outdoor exercise. My knowledge of butterflies is confined to the fact that the white ones feed upon cabbage leaves and the purple ones upon clover. I have not carried nor pawned a watch now for some fifteen years. Of every parcel which comes to me I preserve the string and the wrapping-paper with demented thrift. Such are the thoughts which occur to me when I think frankly about myself.

My blood pressure, my pulse, and my metabolism are all so abnormally low as to interest the medical profession: of the three I can understand only what my pulse is. The

people of whom I am fondest appear to me to be uncommonly tedious in their talk. Although credited with murder, I was not really the philanthropist who committed it. I once renewed a subscription to *Vanity Fair*. I do not easily digest milk or ham or fried food of any sort. I have not yet read *Ulysses*, and at this late day I in all likelihood shall not ever read *Ulysses*. My birthplace is now an upstairs room in the Richmond Public Library.

I peculiarly enjoy the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, almost any compilation of folk-lore, the odes of Horace, and William Winter's unintentionally comic two volumes about Richard Mansfield. I think too much about books: it is perhaps some retroactive effect of starting life in what afterward became a library. I never argue any matter with anyone except when peach ice cream or chipped beef is served to me in my own home. I like sunsets, genealogy, Benedictine, illiterate women, and small china animals. With my dinner coat I continue to wear a turn-down collar. Such are the thoughts which occur to me when I think frankly about myself.

I do virtually all my own typewriting, employing only the forefingers of each hand, and the left forefinger but for the shift-keys. In dressing each morning I am careful to put on the right foot sock first. In addition to the books I have published I wish that I had also written, with a little compression, *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*, and *Henry Esmond* very much as it stands. I can never think of anything to say to a clergyman. Thunderstorms frighten me. I understand nothing whatever about motor cars except that it is a point of honour to go up all hills in high, and that the radiator is the thing in front.

It does not seem logical that I have looked at every painting and sketch and water colour in the Musée Gustave Moreau (includ-

ing the three hundred little ones in the revolving stand), but have not yet seen Niagara Falls. To touch the skin of a peach sets my teeth on edge: so does the sight of a cut and wilted flower. I am stingy in small money matters. I dislike nobody, now that Woodrow Wilson is dead. In writing prose I observe that I do not naturally employ the *Ionic a minore* or the third pæon. I support twenty-eight goldfish, each of whom has his or her own name. I have never been cordially moved by philanthropy or altruism. When a dentist is working on my teeth I find it an immense comfort to wave both feet in the air. Such are the thoughts which occur to me when I think frankly about myself.

I HAVE set down these particulars as they occur to me, my dear Ruth, so that you may duly communicate them to the teacher who suggested that you write the letter which I now answer. In addition I am asking you to tell your teacher that, apart from the present good standing of the *monologue intérieur*, I have yet further literary authority for answering a fool (by which I do not at all mean you, my dear) according to his folly. I would like you also to inform your teacher that I esteem him (or, it may be, her) as a most meritorious candidate for the cucking-stool, the knout, the bastinado, and the decisive torture of the pilliwincks.

For while one does not look for distinguished mental ability within the confines of a high-school, I do think that even a school-teacher is none the worse off for an occasional gleam of intelligence and commonsense. Yet week after week these jacks-in-office, to every appearance, are inciting their pupils to read my books—in itself a venial and even a generous idiocy—and to write me such letters as I have indicated. I assert here no pre-eminence in affliction:

every author known to me is annoyed over and yet over again with such letters. Authors have come to regard such letters as an unavoidable custom, as a sort of nuisance tax upon the second edition. From every high-school in the country, I infer, scores upon scores of such letters are sent out every week during the school term. And as a rule some sort of prize is offered for the child who secures the most comprehensive and most lively extortion from his or her auctorial victim. The entire process has, in brief, become a custom.

It follows that of all the pests who annoy me with the connivance of the United States Post Office Department, you, my dear Ruth, are the most pestiferous. The others can at worst be ignored with a clean conscience: but one views a child rather differently. A child of thirteen, if there were nothing else, is just about to begin a life sentence in the penitentiary of mature existence; and one really does prefer in these last moments to gratify the least wishes of the condemned. Your scrapbook, and your English course, and the prize which you may or may not win, will very soon not matter to you, I know: but the point is that they do matter now. Everything matters at thirteen. It is indeed the beginning of a time of life so full of emotion and breathlessness and surprise, and so brief, that (as I but now suggested) you ought to waste no moment of this not wholly happy but wholly interesting season in reading books.

IN fact I am here tempted to advise you throughout the length of your mortal living to avoid books consistently. Books have their merits, such merits as old Richard De Bury has well expressed in a fine medley of Scriptural metaphors. Books, let us grant with him, are golden urns in which manna

is laid up, they are rocks flowing with honeycombs; they resemble the four-streamed river of Paradise, whereby the human mind is fed, and the arid intellect is moistened and watered; they are even as fruitful olives, as vines of Engaddi, and as fig-trees knowing no sterility. But I incline to part company with the bibliophilic Bishop of Durham when he adds that books are burning lamps to be ever held in the hand.

Yet I don't know: no sane person lights a lamp before dusk, and toward the evening of life it is true that books do come in well enough to kill time for a stinted while before time kills you. The figure holds, it may be, barring only the word "ever"; for one should remember, if but tacitly, that books can afford at best a stop-gap between the serious doings of any well-conditioned life. Books, in brief, have been vastly over-advertised.

The self-evident trouble here is that all the millions of imposing pæans written and printed about books have originated perforce among writers. Indeed I myself have composed several of them. It is well therefore to appraise these sayings in somewhat the same spirit which one extends to the no less eloquent encomia of shaving creams and of ginger ales and of toothpastes encountered in the back of most magazines: the sentiments expressed there are lofty, and altruistic, and for the while convincing; yet they have been prepared, after all, by the proprietors of these delights with a noble design to make of these supreme human blessings merchandise.

Just so, most of the fine things which writers have said about books, and about literature in general, do come to us as a sort of glorified "sales talk". Books, as one should say, are well enough in their proper place: but during your youth at any rate, my dear Ruth, that place is, I rather think, on the bookshelf.

There are, you see, when a girl is young, so very many other things to do except to read with the light falling properly at your left shoulder, things which will not hold over and await meekly a deferred engagement like Dante and Shakespeare, or marriage and death. I shall not indicate these things beyond the general statement that most of them require the avoidance of any serious sequel and the co-operancy of a boy. Yet it does occur to me in this place that I was once privileged to hear Mr. Joseph Hergesheimer address a girls' school. He exhorted his enthralled young hearers very movingly, I remember, to pay no further attention whatever to their assigned studies, nor to the possible comments of their teachers, but to remember always that the main duty of every girl was to acquire charm, since charm was the sole needed asset of womanhood. I incline to agree with Mr. Hergesheimer, in so far that I think a woman who possesses the indefinable quality called charm need lack for nothing else in a worldful of men all eager, and many of them able, to satisfy her desires. She has but (in the words of yet another competent instructor of young women) to be good to some man who can be good to her, and all bright blessings shall be added to her abundance.

To the other side, I do reflect that one may not properly nurture that which one lacks. I do not believe that feminine charm is a matter to be acquired by pains-taking, like the French language or a bank account, but think it to be an innate gift highly cultivable. And, to my finding, not one woman-child in a hundred—but what do I say! not one, I mean, in a thousand—is born with that same indefinable quality called charm. To these luckless women who compose the unmagnetic majority, books, I admit, can do no great hurt: books properly selected may

even help them by-and-by to become physicians or social workers or United States Senators or very famous novelists, and may in this way mitigate by not a little their predestined failure in life.

But upon this matter, my dear child, I am prejudiced. I know only that the woman whom I find most attractive, and by far the most inexplicably contented, avoids books somewhat as I myself avoid watermelons, not out of any active distaste, but simply as one who finds them not worth bothering with. In fact, during our twenty years' acquaintanceship she has to my knowledge read but two books from beginning to end, these peculiarly favoured volumes being Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Love among the Artists* and Mr. Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air*. My own books she has looked into, as each first came from the publishers, and has then put aside without comment—and yet too with the sort of silence which made me feel I was getting off rather lightly.

But that is hardly the point. The real point is that I envy this marvelously gifted woman's capacity to meet author after author, and to get on with them handsomely (even be they female) without affecting the least interest in, or the most faint notion of ever reading, their balderdash. It is a truly breathtaking accomplishment which I, who am made of feebler stuff, can but covet hopelessly. I reflect perforce what a vast deal of double-dealing and what tedious sessions of time-wasting this accomplishment, if but I possessed it, would save me, day after day, when I meet precisely the same authors. And it is an accomplishment, too, which keeps me in a meek state of unwillingness to believe that any woman-child, in a world wherein almost anybody is rather more than apt to be married occasionally by an author, can be well prepared against her future through en-

forced contact with books. I incline contrariwise, after thus confessing my unavoidable bias, to resent this notion.

Above all do I resent the notion that my books, of all books, should be inflicted upon an undefended girl-child, along with algebra and geography and spelling and yet other nuisances of school life. I wish very heartily, my dear Ruth, that you could understand the unimportance and the evanescence of all these matters. As a cloud passes, so will they depart from you imperceptibly.

You will never note their going. Only by-and-by in the unerudite hours of maturity, when nobody who is worth knowing knows anything in particular, will you recall that dark tyranny of useful and improving knowledge which molested your girlhood contemporaneously with mumps and chicken pox and pimples. From every one of these youthful ills—at fifty-three, let us say—you will have recovered forever: they will then seem to you as dim and futile as at that date will seem the first gawky boy to take liberties with your person: you will recall these matters, if at all, with the same vague smiling. Geography and algebra and that man in Virginia's books, whoever he was, will be at one with pimples and the finger-nail which hurt you a little very long ago: none will matter a bean's worth to the slack hedonism of your middle age.

I know that for my part, when I reflect on my own Merovingian school-days, and upon the many things which I was then taught, and which I once "knew", I am divided between self-admiration and a wonder which, within reasonable limits, is wild with all regret. And it seems to me a sound parable.

For I admire, I repeat, without in the least bit envying, my erstwhile accomplishments.

With all history how familiar was I (fond memory now remarks, in a state of proper pride), with what lists of monarchs at my finger-tips, and with leading dates and decisive battles at the tip of my tongue! What countries could I not bound, with a crisp *résumé* of the capital of each, the larger cities, main rivers, and chief exports, in the same hour that I dealt masterfully with compound interest and cube roots and cosines? In five languages also was I skilled: I harboured information as to irregular French verbs, and I knew the approved order of adverbial clauses under varying conditions in Germany; I discovered for myself that the dullness of *Don Quixote* had not been inserted by the Anglophobe who translated this dreadful book into English; I was very learned in the metres of Catullus and Horace, and I wrote with my own hands a monograph upon the verbals in *-tos* as they are employed by Æschylus. It is really wonderful how much I have forgotten. There was calculus, for instance: I graduated in this science with full honours; but today, beyond a prevailing impression that some of it was differential, and that you did it on a large blackboard and so got your finger nails uncomfortably full of chalk, I have no least notion as to what calculus was like.

Well, but my point is that today the history has all been rewritten and the geography thoroughly changed (with a neat filling up, I observe, of the interior of Africa and the two polar regions) so that the most of what I once knew as to these matters is today not true, even if I could remember any of it. What was taught me as to astronomy and psychology appears today as unveracious as what was taught me about the prevalence of Anglo-Saxon influence in the higher reaches of our racial character and literature. It develops that (after the long years I gave over

to revering them) there were no Anglo-Saxons. Their vacated eminence in learned esteem has been filled by Nordics. The chemistry I studied in the basements of William and Mary might as well have been acquired from Paracelsus at the University of Basle. Hardly a word of it holds true any longer. Even physics, they tell me, does not adhere to its former views of lightning rods and crystallization and the infallibility of Sir Isaac Newton: so that here too I did but laboriously amass a great deal of misinformation. Only a little of that which I learned about literature, in brief, remains unshaken, and yet clings to me as a ruthless impediment to my ever winning a Pulitzer prize or to my being taken in, in any sense, by the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

I HAVE not a doubt, my dear Ruth, that a majority of the things you are now being taught at your Indian school (including the advisability of a polite interest in my books) will, by the time when you have happily forgotten all about these tedious matters, be equally discredited. You may perceive then, in due season, that these impositions of your school-days (*quorum pars fui*, without in the least intending it) are in some sort a parable. All through our lives the teacher, in one or another high disguise, stands at our elbows, eternally teaching, and for the most part teaching nonsense. Yet the name of every well-thought-of teacher, under all robings and honorary degrees, is custom; and we must all listen respectfully, because custom teaches at each particular moment the approved sum of human wisdom.

By-and-by perhaps one notices that the lessons are inconsistent, and deviate from what was taught yesterday: as it was taught me, for example, that the interior of Africa was for all practical purposes vacant (the reports

from no exploring party led by H. Rider Haggard being considered final), just so was it then taught that Jehovah sat immediately overhead, that no virtuous woman smoked, and that mutton-suet cured colds. Upon none of these four tenets does custom insist today: we are told of quite other eternal verities; and I for one must continue to listen to this never-resting instructor with rather more of respectfulness than of faith. For against this great and universal teacher I at fifty-three am powerless, and as inefficient as you are at thirteen to resist the dictates of that lesser dullard who has prompted you to annoy me with your absurd blue-and-gilt letter.

So do I approach my moral. This, Ruth, is the whole parable: we are all at school every day of our lives; and but a little of what we are taught remains true overnight. The familiar verities and all the generally accepted knowledge, nay, even the tacit assumptions and the most simple axioms, of each human generation are discarded unceasingly. They are put aside with a continuance

so inflexible that every morning their revered pedestals are occupied by fresh fallacies. Indeed, the approved sum of human wisdom has been altered, somewhere, in the very while that you read this sentence; and facts which were undeniable but a heart-beat back have become no longer true.

Yet always, at every instant, custom teaches us, this and this only is the entire truth at last, this and this only is demanded of the well-thought-of person now and forever. And custom does not put up with any least scepticism in the while that custom continues to instruct the civilized in the established faith of all rational beings during this particular forenoon.

It is a situation wherein the observant pupil may well temper a respectful attitude with some inner dubiety: yet he will perform each task, meanwhile—just as you and I are doing, my dear—which the teacher directs. To do that is neither brilliant nor heroic; but it is relatively safe. And to such truisms about life do we, in the end, return.