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THE MAKING OF MY LIBRARY

By

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THE FORBIDDEN TERRITORY, THE EUNUCH OF STAMBOUL, OLD ROWLEY,
A private life of Charles II, THE DEVIL RIDES OUT, THEY FOUND ATLANTIS,etc.,etc.

The first printed matter I ever purchased myself was a weekly issue of "Chums".

Up to that date Bible stories, Hans Andersen, Grimm, Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare" and, easily first favourite, Mrs. Nesbitt's "Five Children and It" had been my fare – mostly, of course, read aloud to me.

Perhaps it was the chapter on Redskins in the latter that started the trouble. In any case, at the age of seven, I saw this issue of "Chums" in a small newspaper shop when walking with my nurse. On its cover was a picture of a Red Indian being lassoed by a Cowboy. Its price was a penny, the total of my weekly pocket money, but I insisted on buying it and carried it home in triumph.

Alas ! My father was furious. Even now I find it a little difficult to understand why. Declaring that he would not allow such filth in the house he burnt the paper before I had the chance to read it. I dared not protest but, as the angry tears coursed down my cheeks, I felt that a barbarous and senseless injustice had been done. That was the first clash in a war that lasted for nearly a [2] quarter of a century between my father and myself on the question of wasting my time and money on "books".

At eight I was sent to a boarding school and there, since there was no longer anyone to read to me, I began to read to myself in earnest. What, I do not remember, except for an attempt on "The Water Babies", which failed from boredom at the second chapter. I demanded stronger meat.

At nine I "discovered" Dumas. "The Three Musketeers" absolutely enthralled me. To this day I still think that it stands head and shoulders above any other adventurous romance, of any period or against any background, that has ever been written.

It has every one of the ingredients necessary to thrilling fiction of the highest class; speed, suspense, dexterity of plot, love interest, tragedy, humour, clear characterisation, swift dialogue, the hero fighting on the weaker side against tremendous odds and a background from which most readers can add to their store of knowledge to some extent. Above all it achieves real greatness from the utter selfless devotion of the dauntless four, which must have been the inspiration of many splendid friendships in real life.

Its influence on me was immense, so great in fact that when I sat down, nearly thirty years later, to write my own first book, THE FORBIDDEN TERRITORY, I quite subconsciously used Dumas's formula in building my principal characters.

As the critics pointed out: my De Reichleau was the noble Athos in a modern setting, my hulking American, Rex Van Ryn, the [3] loyal hearted Porthos, my cultured Jew, Simon Aron, the wily Aramis, and my Richard Eaton a pale shadow of the immortal D'Artagnan.

In every other way the two stories are, of course, completely different but I believe I owe it very largely to the profound influence which Dumas's method of storytelling exercised upon my early life that, three years after its first appearance here, THE FORBIDDEN TERRITORY has been translated into fourteen languages and is obtainable now in nearly every city in the world.

Once I had discovered Dumas I read every book of his that I could lay my hands on. The next step was actually to possess copies of them so that I might read them again whenever I wished. That was how, at the age of nine, my library started.

During the course of my school days I read hundreds of novels; my preference, owing to Dumas, always being towards historical romance. Scott, I found hopelessly lacking in drive, vitality and colour; Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities" a poor dull affair, and Thackeray's "Henry Esmond" positively unreadable, but Stanley Weyman, Baroness Orczy, and Harrison Ainsworth soon found honoured places on my modest shelves.

The bulk of my pocket money always went on books in spite of my father's protests, and by the opening of the war I had gathered together a motley collection of several hundred paperbacks and cheap editions. "This litter" it was termed at home, but I would not allow the most tattered among them to be cleared out in any spring cleaning.

[4] In September 1914, although only seventeen, I received my commission and for the next four years and a half I lived either at the front or in camps remote from most forms of amusement, so there was ample time for reading.

I had long since read every historical romance that was worthy of the name and, by comparison with my old favourites, I despised the stilted trash which appeared in the average cloak and sword romance, so I was compelled to turn to other fields.

In those war years I read quite indiscriminately, often not even bothering to notice the name of the author. Most of my reading was light contemporary stuff. I found Raffles and Arsène Lupin; Le Queux, Conan Doyle, Oppenheim, Edgar Wallace, and collected them all in Hodders, Nelson's or Ward Lock's shilling and sevenpenny editions.

Perhaps I lack the crossword puzzle mind which delights in straight detective fiction, but I preferred Conan Doyle's "Brigadier Gerard" and Professor Chalonor (sic) stories to his Sherlock Holmes, and I still place Oppenheim far above Edgar Wallace. The glamour of millionaires in Monte Carlo caught my imagination in a way which Wallace's police stories could never do. Then I 'found' John Buchan and hailed him as the master of them all.

Just after the war I made an important step. I saw a set of books, "Secret Court memoirs" in twenty volumes limited to 1,000 sets. The price appalled me, £17.10. but I had to have them and I arranged to buy them on an instalment plan.

Actually they were rather dull reading and, as prices were high then, you can buy the same set anywhere to-day for less than [5] half the price I paid; but I was thrilled to the marrow to think that I was the owner of so rare a work – of which there were only 1,000 sets ! Naturally I had to lie to my father about the price since, although he could not altogether dictate how I spent my money, I had to act tactfully with him as I was earning it in his business and, therefore, really dependent on him.

In every other way my father was extremely good to me and, in his latter years, we became the best of friends, but, from 1918 to 1925, a battle was waged every few months about my pig-headed persistence in buying books. He never read a book himself and simply could not understand my mad desire to possess them. He argued too, with some justification, that I was always overdrawn, that my clothes were a disgrace because I never had enough money to buy new ones, and that so much reading distracted my thoughts from business, which should have been my principal concern.

On numerous occasions he generously paid up my bills but I never managed to get out of debt because I never had the courage to include my booksellers accounts among the ones I gave him. He tried to put a stop to my reading by installing a special switch in his bedroom by which he could put out the light in mine when he went to bed at 10. o'clock – although I was then twenty-two years of age and had served as an officer all through the war. I replied by laying in a stock of candles and continuing to read ~~into~~ until the small hours each morning.

The "Secret Court Memoirs", although disappointing, led me to abandon fiction for a time and I swerved in a completely different [6] direction – to Ancient Civilisations, Folklore and Religions – almost my first serious reading. Greece, Rome, Egypt, Peru, Chaldea and Mexico occupied me for two years. Nothing that Gibbon, Groot, Maspero, Budge, Prescott or Flinders Petrie could write proved dull to me. I read the twelve volumes of

Fraser's "Golden Bough", "The Q'Uran," "The Vedas and "The Analogues of Confuscious" as eagerly as if they had been the most thrilling fiction. Great weighty volumes began to take their place upon my shelves. It was during this period too that I came upon the legends of the Lost Continent and from my reading then comes my latest story, THEY FOUND ATLANTIS.

It was in the latter part of 1920, however, that the greatest step of all occurred. I met again a man, some years older than myself, whom I had first known in the war. Up to that point all my reading had been chosen at random, unaided, unplanned, and in profound ignorance of great books. This ex-brother-officer was a wealthy, travelled man of immense charm and culture. We became inseparable companions and I owe him a debt which it is impossible to repay. He taught me, not only many of the elegancies of life, but opened for me the treasure house of the world's greatest literature and led me to appreciate style.

My father hated that friendship. He did his best to break it up arguing, again perhaps with some justification, that champagne suppers for four, from which I did not return until the dawn, or dinners beginning with foie-gras and ending with Chateau Y'Quem, were not a good influence upon a young man who had to earn his living. [7]

He failed; only death severed that wonderful friendship.

In the meantime my ragged array of books had blossomed into a library. Flaubert, Wilde, Gautier, Pater, Tolstoi, Dostoeisky, Petronius, George Moore, Poe, Proust, Boccaccio, Stendhal, Rabelias, Maupassant, Otteney, James Branch Cabell, Apulliys, Wasserman, Baudelaire, Tagore, Casanova's Memoirs, Motley's Rise of the Dutch Republic, Hakluyt's Voyages, and Barton's Arabian Nights. With my friend's guidance I had bought and devoured them all.

I lived for years in a constant state of bankruptcy but every cupboard in my room grew full with rich thoughts and timeless phrases. My father sulked protested and threatened in vain. When I was not up to my neck in a love affair or talking my head off with my friend, my mind was in the clouds. I was a bad son, I grant you.

My great companion was, among other things, a brilliant amateur of psychology so I varied my reading of great literature with Freud, Jung, Lombroso, Krafft-Ebing, Bloch and Havelock Ellis. He was also interested in the "occult" so another score of volumes were smuggled home, and the background of my black magic book, THE DEVIL RIDES OUT, owes much to them.

For six years, the latter four of which were guided by my friend, I read at the rate of about two hundred volumes a year and, during that period, I hardly read one modern fiction book.

By 1925 my father had come to accept my madness as something too strong to battle against. Our periodical rows about money continued but, apart from these, he abandoned his active efforts to [8] thwart my passion although he still disapprove of my obsession and my friend. The end came one night when my parents entertained an eminent divine to dinner.

This churchman was an erudite and charming man. I learned later that he was the owner of a world-famous library which included a wonderful collection of original historical documents. He asked me after dinner how I spent my spare time, and I told him – books. We began to talk of Buddha and Shaw; the French Revolution and Freud. He asked to see my books and I took him upstairs. Very wickedly we enthused among those printed pages for two hours, to the neglect of my parents and the other guests. On leaving, our distinguished visitor made his apologies to my father and said:

"This evening I have broken the tenth commandment. Young people these days – well ! I do not often regret that I have no boy of my own, but I envy you yours. How infinitely proud you must be, Mr. Wheatley, that you have such a wonderful son."

Put down like that it looks as though I must have been a first class little prig – but I record the incident because that was the end of the war that had lasted over twenty years between my father and myself.

He realised then that I might have spent money but I had not wasted it. I might have given time which, expended otherwise, would have made me a better business man, but I had gained something which no commercial success could have given me. I had forged wings which could carry me into a world that he could never hope to enter. [9]

From that time onwards our relations were altogether happier and, in consequence, I became a far greater asset to him in his business. He made me a full partner and often travelled for months at a time, leaving the management of all his affairs in my hands with ever growing confidence. It is nice to think now how he would have rejoiced in my success as an author for, in his last years, we came very close to each other. His early disappointment in me was forgotten and he became convinced that his ugly duckling had turned out after all to be a swan.

During those last years of his my friend went to join Ovid and Voltaire where they walk in fields of asphodel and I married. More space for books and new surroundings caused me to launch out again. I became interested in the moderns.

Excellently advised I bought only first editions in mint state. Soon my new shelves were carrying A.E.Coppard,C.E.Montagu, David Garnett, H.M.Tomlinson, Martin Armstrong, Liam O'Flaherty, Sinclair Lewis, Lytton Strachey, Margaret Kennedy, Stephen Hudson, Rose Macaulay, D.H. Lawrence, Eugene O'Neil, and a score of other contemporary writers of distinction. The first Bibliography of Aldous Huxley's works was compiled from my perfect set.

Then I began to collect firsts of the outstanding fiction of this century. Bennett, Norman Douglas, Baron Corvo, Max Beerbohm, Maughan, A.P.Herbert, McFee, Kipling, Barrie, Samuel Butler, Walpole, Gissing and the rest.

[10] The last phase has been since I have been writing books myself, for that has brought me into personal touch with many eminent authors. With the greatest kindness they have signed their books so that now I am the fortunate possessor of many hundred association copies. Wells, James Hilton, Frankau, Cronin, Buchan, Evelyn Waugh, Claude Houghton, Radcliffe Hall, Mottram, T.F.Powys, Baroness Orczy, Thomas Burke, William Gerhardi, Michael Arlen, Noel Coward, Rebecca West and innumerable other authors have all added to the interest of my collection by autographing many copies and, in numerous cases, complete sets of the first editions of their works.

This account of the making of my library may convey the impression that I am a hermit. Far from it. I have travelled widely, at one time I was a director of six companies, I have a great love of entertaining and, by the mercy of God, many friends. I would sooner talk to anyone of intelligence over a glass of wine than read a book. Yet my books have been a never failing joy to me and it is quite certain that had I not read so much it would have been utterly impossible for me to have written those books of my own which I am happy to think now have brought relaxation and pleasure to a great number of people.

That I could afford to buy books in the early days was largely due, despite himself, to the generosity of my father; but also to my denying myself many other pleasures. Some people may not be so fortunately situated as I was then, but if they cannot buy for the moment our great Public Libraries offer them everything that I have [11] ever read, and a million more, for the asking. Later, when luck comes their way, it will be an added joy actually to possess copies of their favourites and, in the meantime, they will be acquiring some understanding of innumerable aspects of life past and present which may bring them, as it is bringing me today, without capital expenditure or overheads, a very pleasant fortune.