

The World of Reading

From my earliest youth I have had my nose in a newspaper. The habit began before I entered school and has held me in subjection since. To my father's house came the *Leader*, a Democratic organ; *Der Demokrat*, the German daily published by the Lischer family and edited by the capable Dr. August Richter; the *Dannebrog*, a weekly that satisfied my father's mild nostalgia for his native land, and the Sunday issues of the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* of Chicago. Some of the topics discussed in these media left an indelible imprint on my memory. The *Staats-Zeitung* campaigned against the display of the American flag before schoolhouses as a needless extravagance. All the newspapers published accounts of the Holmes-Castle murders, and when, years later, I became acquainted in Chicago with the police captain who had worked on that celebrated case, I was able to keep pace with his reminiscences by recalling what I had read as a child.

A glimpse of what went on in Davenport before and during the Civil War came to me quite unexpectedly as a result of roaming around the Scott County Court House. My school was located across the street from the Court House.

Sometimes we boys would ascend the tall tower, which since has been removed. This tower did not have a steel skeleton but was built of reinforced brick. It had several flights of stairs inside and then a long ladder that led to the cupola. It was a harrowing ascent for there were only a few rays of light in the tower, but by keeping our eyes looking up and not down we reached the top.

Having conquered the tower, we next investigated the vaults, which contained files of old Davenport newspapers. These were kept locked, but Sheriff Edgar D. McArthur would give me the key, and I would go there to read them. These newspapers disclosed the bitter animosities that divided citizens during the Civil War. Davenport had some who, although not favoring the extension of slavery, resented the war and fought the draft. The newspapers published their names. This taught me what the school histories did not stress — that in every democratic community there are persons with views not welcome to the majority. By the time I read this history all trace of bitterness had vanished.

Any person who has reached maturity seems quite old to a schoolboy. His teachers carry so much authority that they seem even farther removed from him than other adults. But after passing adolescence he suddenly sees the barriers of the years fall away. I had this experience with several of my grade school teachers. After col-

lege I renewed acquaintance with them on a basis of mutual respect. Miss Anna Mittelbuscher, for instance, enrolled for courses at the University of Chicago when I was an undergraduate there. Another teacher told me that she was only 20 when I was 10, and asked whether I recalled how often she came to the classroom sleepy and listless, the result of dancing into the early morning hours. She was surprised to learn that I had observed no such derelictions, whereas I was surprised that one in such a position of authority actually had been gay and frivolous. I did recall two teachers who showed little interest in their pupils, and who left teaching to marry. Practically all, however, were devoted men and women, working harder for less than members of other professions, as they do everywhere.

I also recall, with respect, the principal, H. T. Bushnell, who taught us American history, and who came every day in his surrey, and J. B. Young, the superintendent of schools, who looked like Uncle Sam. The janitor, Paul Schmacher, found me a sympathetic listener when he recited his tribulations, and in return showed me the workings of the big steam boiler that heated the school.

The first library of which I was aware occupied an old-fashioned what-not in the corner of a schoolroom at old No. 8. I said to the teacher, Miss Alice Croul, that I knew a better way of arranging the books, and she, sensing my hunger,

appointed me librarian on the spot. I had a wonderful time lending books to my classmates and reading them in my spare time. Among them were *The Pathfinder* and *The Spy* of Cooper, *The Heir of Redclyffe* by Charlotte M. Yonge, *John Halifax, Gentleman* by Dinah Maria Craik, which drew tears from the girls, and tales by Hawthorne and Irving.

One day Kuno Struck, who was buying sectional bookcases and already had three shelves filled, came to school with a copy of *Tom Sawyer*. I was enchanted by the drawings and begged to be allowed to take it home, which Kuno granted. A wet snowstorm was raging; I hugged the book to my chest inside my coat as I faced the customary weather. When I reached home I saw with dismay that the covers had suffered water stains. These I tried hard to obliterate. I read the book three times before returning it; then I stammered my regrets that it had suffered in the storm. Kuno looked over the book, but said nothing. I know now what my feelings would have been in such a situation, but Kuno was a gentleman at every age.

At the 5-and-10 I found a copy of *Treasure Island* for 10 cents, and it led me to look for *Kidnaped* and other stories by Stevenson. The Davenport Public Library was located on the ground floor of a building at the southwest corner of Sixth and Brady streets. The second story had a dance floor where we held high school assemblies, and

where many of us learned dancing from Professor Frank Clendenen. While still in grammar school I put in Saturday reading bound volumes of the *Youths' Companion*, *St. Nicholas*, and more adult magazines in the library. Such stories as *Chris and the Wonderful Lamp*, which Sousa worked into a children's opera, and Brander Matthews' *Tom Paulding*, remained indelibly in my memory. Soon I was reaching for back numbers of *Scribner's*, *Harper's*, and *Century* and becoming acquainted with a society described by Henry James, Edith Wharton, William Dean Howells, Mrs. Burton Harrison, and George W. Cable.

I joined my schoolmates in debating the merits of Rudyard Kipling, whose vast popularity was being impaired because he had dared write an unhappy, but logical, ending to *The Light that Failed*. I approved the unhappy ending. Today an author who writes a happy ending must tremble at the bar of criticism. For a few months high school students published a magazine called *The Red and Blue*, of which Arthur D. Ficke and Ned Crossett were editors, and to which I, as a freshman, contributed some stories. How far we have moved from our beginnings! I write this in New York City; Ficke, poet and art connoisseur, sleeps in a dense wood off a country road in Columbia County, New York; Crossett, who inherited a vast lumber domain, died a few months ago in California.

Early associations are tremendously important to a growing boy, because they give him measures by which he sizes up his world. One of my earliest friends with a serious attitude was Carl J. Wiggers, now a leading authority on cardiovascular research. Carl's father was host of Wiggers' Hall (also known as Lahrmann's Hall) at the southeast corner of Second and Ripley streets. Its second floor had one of the oldest stages in Davenport. Carl and I played games on its ancient stage. Its front curtain was attached to a heavy wooden roller, known as a "barrell," and when operated rolled up from the floor.

Carl bought the *Strand* and I bought *Pearson's* every month, and we exchanged them and read A. Conan Doyle, Cutcliffe Hyne, Barry Pain, and other English authors. I bought the *Atlantic Monthly* now and then. When S. S. McClure was stirring up interest in *McClure's*, I was eager to read it, but my spare pennies from carrying papers did not reach that far. I had to choose between *Atlantic* and *McClure's*. Sometimes I managed both by imposing on the good nature of Fritz Wernentin, who ran a stationery store in Harrison Street. I would buy one magazine, read it overnight, and give it back for another the next day. I remember his kindness as typical of the friendliness that adults have for growing lads.

The youth who opened my eyes to wonderful reading was Charles Reining, whose good taste

in literature was unerring and contagious. He first handed me Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and when I was greatly affected by its dramatic power he fed me other volumes from his Ibsen shelf; then Schopenhauer and similar philosophers. When we got to Kant I bogged down; this did not deter Charley from patiently trying to clarify passages for me while driving over country roads of Scott County. I never met another friend who combined so well an interest in ideas with patience in describing them. I missed him sorely when he chose to study at Stanford, where he got his doctorate. His early death gave me some hard conclusions about the unreasonable inevitabilities in life, which no amount of philosophizing has been able to dispel.

S. S. McClure's dynamic editing also made itself felt in Davenport. He had attended Knox College in Galesburg and made periodic visits to the West looking for talent. His employment of Ida M. Tarbell to trace the footsteps of the young Abraham Lincoln opened the world of Lincoln lore to me. McClure called Edward Collins from the office of the Bradys' Davenport *Times* to take charge of the manufacturing department of *McClure's Magazine* in New York. After illness forced Collins to return to Davenport, he resumed newspaper work and later was elected recorder of Scott County. The milk of human kindness flowed deep in Collins. I sat spellbound when he described in familiar terms authors who passed

through the McClure office, all great names to me.

We young and aspiring writers spoke with admiration of Susan Glaspell, who had won the huge prize of \$500 for a short story in a contest held by *Black Cat* magazine. We studied the magazine carefully and wondered whether we could do as well. George Cram Cook, whom Miss Glaspell later married, and about whom she wrote her wonderful book, *The Road to the Temple*, was on a farm at Buffalo, near Muscatine. Floyd Dell, who became a reporter for the Rock Island page of *The Daily Times*, joined Cook there and later was associated with him in the literary section of the *Chicago Evening Post*. One day Floyd Dell told me that McClure had bought a poem of his, and as we walked down the street Dell recited it. This was the nearest I had ever come to knowing a successful author, and I glowed by reflected light.

The writing fashion at the turn of the century was local color, expressed chiefly in the short story. The magazines were saturated with it. It included the portrayal of quaint characters who talked dialect. It was invariably goodhumored writing, done with a touch of condescension toward the characters described. One of the principal writers in this *genre* was Miss Alice French of Davenport, who wrote under the pen name of Octave Thanet. Some of her stories had Davenport backgrounds; I remember especially one that

dealt with a rector at Miss French's church, Grace Episcopal Cathedral. Miss French also made use of Davenport material in her long novel, *The Man of the Hour*. She prompted the Iowa Chapter of the Colonial Dames of America to offer prizes for literary essays, two of which I won.

Miss French was instrumental in getting Andrew Carnegie to give Davenport a new public library. She never took credit for this. When the library went up at the corner of Fourth and Main streets I became enthusiastic over its simple, dignified lines, so thoroughly in keeping with its purposes. I did not at the time know the meaning of functional architecture. Some Davenport citizens thought the building commonplace; they wanted French turrets and dormers. Judge John F. Dillon, who lived in Davenport as a young lawyer in the 1850's, became a judge of the Seventh Judicial District and of the Iowa Supreme Court, and then moved East, was called from New York to deliver the dedicatory address May 11, 1904. Only a few years ago I picked up, in a New York bookstore, historical works from his library, bearing his signature and the notation, "Davenport, 1853."

During one summer vacation from high school I began writing a historical novel. I had done a great deal of reading in this field and my plot had a strong resemblance to the popular stories of the day. I would write diligently at home in the morn-

ings, and then go down to the office of the newspaper of which I was high school correspondent and beat out my copy on the only available typewriter, by a two-finger method. One afternoon, while en route to the office, I learned that a great fire had broken out in the lumber yards east of Rock Island Street. When I arrived there the fire had spread over a wide area. Getting as close as I dared, I climbed to the top of a freight car and from that platform saw whole blocks of frame houses disappear in the flames.

The fire had a disastrous effect on my novel, for in the course of scrambling to the top of the car I lost a chapter. What the disaster meant to others was brought vividly home to me weeks later when my English teacher, Miss Jennie Cleaves, after describing how she had treasured a bit of the original staircase of Old North Church in Boston, suddenly broke down, sobbing: "It's all gone!" The fire had destroyed her house and all her possessions.

HARRY HANSEN