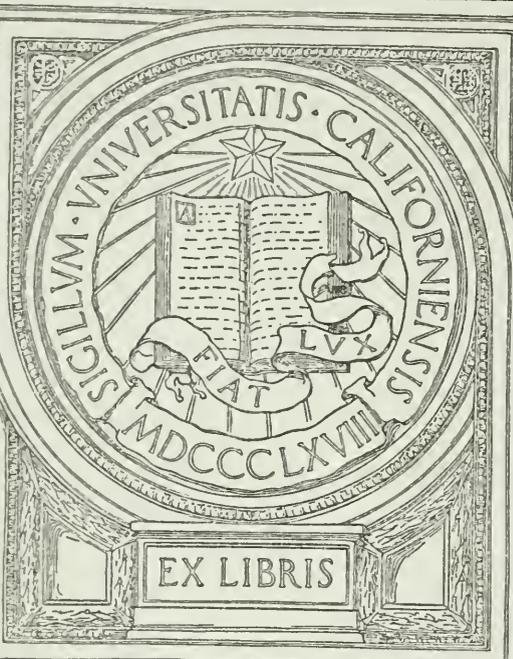


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The Place, The Man and The Book

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Sarah B. Askew

Organizer, New Jersey Public Library Commission

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The Place, The Man and The Book

Separated from the mainland of New Jersey by a bay is a long, narrow strip of land, which in the late spring and summer is the paradise of the fisherman and pleasure seeker.

In the winter time it is a wind-swept, wave-beaten, storm-ridden inaccessible wilderness. The only signs of life are in the little fishing villages, lighthouses and life-saving stations. Way down at the very end of the island, on a little spit of land, is a tiny hamlet. This little "cabbage patch" of houses bears the same name as the town to whose skirts it clings.

The town, itself, in the summer time, is a wealthy, exclusive resort; in winter it is a gaunt, deserted village. With the leaving of the summer visitors, the churches and schools used to be closed, the trains are cut off and the long winter siege begins. In winter, visitors are most rare, for to get there one must take a day's journey, change trains anywhere from seven to ten times, wait in most impossible places, endure cold and all the ills traveling mankind is subject to, and at last drive some four miles in the worst of weather.

The little village so cut off has to be a world unto itself for six months. On one side of it the ocean roars, storms and pounds, black and threatening; on the other, not a hundred yards from high tide level on the ocean side, the waters of the bay surge, following the ocean's every whim. The winter wind blows across the unprotected land with augmented fury, piles the clean white sand in great hummocks,

rattles and rustles the dry sedge grass, which adds its moan of protest to the bleak sounds. At the very land's end stands the lighthouse, and in its shadow the life-saving station. Huddling near them, in the shelter of the hummocks, are little fishermen's huts—tiny, high-windowed, low-roofed affairs, many of them roped down to hold them against the fury of the storm.

This is the place.

Great, bearded fishermen, old sea captains, young sailors, clammers and oystermen who seem to live in oilskins and sou'-westers; women dressed so much like the men you can't distinguish them at fifty yards and who can dig clams, sail a boat, throw a line or do any man's work; girls and boys growing up as their fathers and mothers. They are rough, uncouth, bluff, hearty, whole-souled and as simple as children.

These are the people in outline; the sketch fills in as we go on.

The story of how the library was started and all such things as a church and a school were added to the village, is "another story." But just an outline to make the story clear.

When I first visited the town the summer people said that to get the "natives" to read was simply impossible. "Why," said one of the Royal Line of Biddles, "they are simply the most thankless, degraded and hopeless set I ever saw. Why, last winter before we went away, I collected over a hundred of the most popular books I could find from the summer people, and when I came back this summer I found that not one of them had been read through. Why, to think of it! They would not even read the 'House of mirth,' the 'Masquerader' or the 'Fighting chance.' Now, you know it is hopeless."

In spite of everything my mouth twitched at the

corners. Can you imagine one of those old fishermen sitting before a driftwood fire on a winter's night absorbed in the "Masquerader," while the storm raged outside? I couldn't. Nor could I imagine the girls who mended the nets and sailed the boats poring over the "Fighting chance." She saw my mouth and hastened to add, "But there were some serious books. Why, there was even 'Bryce's American commonwealth' and 'Riis's Battle with the slum.' Cap'n Jed said he read four chapters in Bryce's, just to please me; but what do you think he said? He said the thing was worse than the South Sea for being full of reefs and he no sooner got off one than he got on another."

This time I broke into a chuckle. Cap'n Jed was for many years a "deep sea fisherman," and rose from the very lowest place in the crew of a fishing smack to own his own boat. Then he was for many years Captain of the life-savers, and now is retired and lives in the old life-saving station, which the government abandoned for a new one when the ocean crept up to its very door. He is six feet two in his bare feet, he says, and more than broad accordingly—a very son of Anak. I could just see him with the book clutched in both hands, his feet wide apart, his horn spectacles on his nose, wrestling with Bryce.

However, blood will tell, for this descendant of the Biddles, after looking at me for a moment, broke out into a laugh, too, and said, "Well go ahead. I will give you a building." The money to refurnish and fix it was subscribed and the building was so large and so much money was subscribed that we had room for a school-room, a play-room, a pleasure-room, and a library-room; and, best of all, sliding partitions and chairs, so that the whole could be thrown together for a church and a lecture room.

It seems strange to have a play-room and a pleasure-room. The play-room was for the children; the pleasure-room for the older folks to talk and sew and play games.

Then the money for books was raised, and they commissioned me to select them. I had always wanted to try an experiment, to select a library and with each book to have special people in view whose very names I knew and whose dispositions and characters I had studied, and to try to lead them from one book to another by some connecting link. Always heretofore there had been too many people or too many books. But this time I revelled in it. I got all of the people together. (There are only 175 in the little winter town.) We gathered around the big stove in the library. We told stories, and really and truly talked of ships and seas and many things. So friendly did we all get that Cap'n Jed dubbed me "Captain of the Book Ship." Their stories of wrecks and dangers and hairbreadth escapes were absorbing. Their whims, beliefs and bits of unexpected lore of the heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters under the earth, were delightful and surprising. I found that these simple people, shut up there for so long each year, had a depth of mind and reasoning powers and a quaint, poetical and mystical strain far beyond most people you meet in what we call "civilization."

In this way I got to know them and I thought I saw the trouble with the books the year before. Down there in the winter, where nature is so big and the isolation so complete, and life so simple, the problems that come from an overheated artificial life would not touch them at all. How could such a woman as Lily Bart, such a man as John Chilcote, interest them? Their struggles and trials would seem unreal and unnecessary. Bryce they did not understand. The

slums they did not know and could not comprehend; therefore "The battle" lacked interest. Primal things, the man-to-man fight, primitive natures, people of uncomplex minds, folk-lore, nature, the supernatural, myths and the mystical, and, it seemed to me, even Dickens, with his trick of making a person stand for one characteristic, would appeal to them.

When I had my books collected I went down to organize my library. This did not mean to catalog it. I meant to go over my books again and suit them to the people for whom I had bought them. Each book I had tried to have touch their lives somewhere. There were books on the stars that glittered in the wind-swept sky; there were books on the marvels under the stormy waters; there were books about the men who had sailed the ocean they knew so well; there were books about the lands visited by the ships they watched slip over the horizon; and books about men of might and valor; and books of poetry and quaint legends and myths. These were the books.

I did a great deal of cross referencing by means of lists and notes pasted in the backs of books calling attention to other books. Just what this was I will let my story show. The habit of giving a prologue which the story explains, has come to me from Sarah Grand, and perhaps Mary Cecil Hay. "A white face looks from the window," says the opening paragraph. "A sweet voice calls 'help.' Ah! doom of Lady Evelyn, the ill-fated bride of six seconds." The explanation of this scene, which is given on the next to the last page in the book, is that the said ill-fated bride has sent the bridegroom back for her grand coronet blazing with seventeen diamonds, thirty-two rubies and divers lesser and yet precious stones. And "He hath not come, and the train doth start," she cries.

When the books were all arranged we gave a

party to open the library. Everybody in town was there—in fact there were 176 people there. Old Cap'n Jed said "Cap'n, I caught a coast guard and brung him in." Cap'n Jed was the president of the library board and general adviser plenipotentiary to the town. His speech was something like this. "Gentlemen and all the rest of you and the ladies: It seems to me that the Cap'n here's got her ship purty well in trim for a trial run; and if all on board is agreeable let's push her off with three cheers for the Cap'n, her ship and her freight—'er meanin' these here books. Now for a speech from Cap'n an' sailin' orders."

I told them the books were theirs and what I wanted them to do with them, and how I hoped they would like them. Then, to try a little plan and see whether I had judged them rightly, I told them Dickens's "Child's dream of a star." The picture I will never forget. It was wonderful and pathetic. The place was lit with kerosene lamps that threw great shadows; the fire glowed in the stove; the little children sat on the floor at my feet; the older folks back of them, and the storm beat outside. The people pressed close to hear the story. Men, women and children listened breathlessly, great eyes fixed on my face, and tears, streaming down many of their rough, weather-beaten cheeks. At the end, for awhile, silence held. Then with a deep breath, "That sho' is purty," says old Cap'n Jed. The rest nodded and wiped their faces with their red handkerchiefs, like a man after a long pull.

I gave out the books that night myself, and told them a little of the men who wrote them and the men who lived them. The lives of Captain Kidd, Sir Francis Drake, Hale's "Stories of the sea," Stevenson's "Kidnapped" and "Master of Ballantrae" and "Treasure Island," Ingersoll's "Book of the ocean," Towle's "Magellan and the journey of Marco Polo," Scott's

"Pirate," Ball's "Starland," Kipling's "Captains Courageous," Frothingham's "Sea fighters from Drake to Farragut," and Verne's "Wonderful tales" I knew would succeed. Then I had some for an experiment: Saintine's "Picciola," Repplier's "Book of famous verse," Spencer's "Una and the Red Cross Knight," Dickens's "Our mutual friend," Scott's "Ivanhoe" and "Rob Roy," Barrie's "Little minister," Blackmore's "Lorna Doone," Guerber's "Legends of the middle ages," Dickens's "Oliver Twist," Homer's "Odyssey," by Butcher and Lang, Lummis's "Some strange corners of our country," Harris's "Nights with Uncle Remus."

These were only a few among the experiments, but were the ones I watched most, to see if there was really the vein in them I thought there was, that would touch these lives. I did not turn these books over to them without comment but tried, by relating an incident here, quoting a bit of poetry there, telling of a hero here, to catch their interest. In many of the books I had pasted slips telling of other books. Then I promised to come back in the spring and hear what they thought of the books and what books they had read.

To make the results shown and the criticisms made at this meeting mean more to you I am going to give the setting for the meeting, although you must pardon my following in the footsteps of Laura Jean Libby, who always has the soft spring wind to ripple the carpet of violets when her hero proposes and the storm to lash the trees to fury when the heroine returns to press her wan face to the cold stone doorstep of her paternal ancestors' brownstone house.

In going to my little hamlet, if you cross the bay in a boat from another little town on the mainland right opposite, you can make a trip in twenty minutes

which takes two and one half hours by rail, as the only train must go up the bay to cross and down again. So the arrangement was made that when I wanted to leave the little mainland town I was to get the captain of the life saving station on that side to signal across. On the given day the clouds began to hang low on the horizon and the sea to turn a cold gray and give that little ceaseless moan that presages a storm. They told me not to try it, but I had promised; so we ran up the signals and across came Cap'n Jed in his little "sneak-boat." A "sneak-boat" is something like a canoe with a sail. It is covered over, all except just room to get in. I was put into a "slicker" and a "sou'-wester" covered my head and neck and I was then buttoned into the oilskins that cover the boat.

Says Cap'n Jed, "Should anything ever happen to you in one of these things first thing you do unbutton the oilskins." Reassuring, was it not? The sail across was fine, wind and salt spray in your face making your blood dance and breath come fast in joy of living.

I slept that night at Cap'n Jed's little house. In the best of weather at high tide it stands in the water on its stilted legs. That night it was high tide and the easterly wind blew a gale and the water rolled and thundered around and under the house and the wind raged and tore the windows almost from their fastenings. It was glorious. The next day, in sou'-wester and slicker and top boots I visited; and Oh! the tales the storm brought to memory.

They would hand me the finest wine and say casually: "That come offer the ship wrecked here in 1903. The beach was strewed with wine casks and redwood from the Inlet to here. We took it and put it in the cellars of the summer houses when them government

fellows come down. I tell you it takes a smart 'un to ketch us." Or, "This here salmon come offer such and such er ship, etc."

The storm lifted that night and they all came to the little library building. Men, women and children—every man Jack of them and child and woman Jack, too. We put the little fellows down on the pallet in the corner. The librarian showed me with great pride that since I had been there the 472 books I had brought had circulated 1610 times. There was not a single book that had not been taken out at least once. The favorites had been: Repplier's "Book of famous verse," Kingsley's "Westward, ho!," Homer's "Odyssey," Dickens's "Our mutual friend," Ingersoll's "Book of the ocean," Andersen's "Fairy tales," Harris's "Uncle Remus," Pyle's "Jack Ballister's fortunes," Spencer's "Una and the Red Cross Knight," Tarbell's "He knew Lincoln," Verne's "Twenty thousand leagues under the sea," "Abbott's Queen Elizabeth," Van Dyke's "First Christmas tree," Raspe's "Tales from the travels of Baron Munchausen," "Stories from Wagner," Stevenson's "Treasure Island," Scott's "Talisman," Ball's "Star-land." The order of their popularity was as they are listed.

The popularity of Repplier's book was accounted for partly by the fact that in every book that could be possibly connected with a poem I had pasted a slip telling them to look the poem up, and, "the martial strains which fire the blood, and fairy music ringing in the ears, all these things these people loved."

That day, visiting them, I heard them quote a bit here and a bit there that showed they really loved it.

I asked one old fisherwoman why she liked it and she said, "Because when I am 'er mendin' nets the things sing over in my head." I found that this book worked two ways. The people besides referring to

it to find a poem about a person, place or event that had interested them in their reading, often had been led on, by the swing of the verse, to read another poem, then becoming interested in the poet's theme had hunted up a book on that subject also. To facilitate this we had pasted in the back of the Repplier volume a list of books following out or explaining the half-told stories of the poems.

Kingsley's appeal is too apparent to call for explanation, for, as the young sailor said, "You just fergit you are 'er livin' here, but thinks you are him 'er fightin' the Spaniards there." Surely this meant that he in spirit had sailed the Spanish main and fought with the crew of the gallant *Rose*.

I found that in hunting for books along the same lines and about the same people he had read Towle's "Drake, the sea king of Devon," Morris's "Historical tales—Spanish-American," Edgar's "Sea kings and naval heroes," Abbott's "Naval history of the United States," Frothingham's "Sea fighters," Hale's "Stories of the sea," and Abbott's "History of Elizabeth," all of which were suggested in the back of "Westward, ho!" Of the fifteen people who had read "Westward, ho!" not one had read less than three of the suggested books also. The average had read one half of those listed in the back.

Homer's "Odyssey," with its stirring adventure and the masterful cunning of Odysseus, had greatly pleased them and there were many questions as to how much truth there was in the story. The tale of the old blind poet, and how the book had come down the ages, appealed strongly to them. Especially did they like the old rhyme,

Seven ancient cities claimed the body of Homer dead,
Through which the living Homer begged his daily bread.

Of the suggested books the average number read

was a little over one half. Morris's "Historical tales: Greece" and Church's "Stories from Virgil" had been the most popular.

Ingersoll's "Book of the ocean" seemed to be so far down in the list because the people who took it out insisted on keeping it and reading it over two or three times and arguing between themselves as to whether the author was right. The consensus of opinion was, "He knowed the darndest lot to know what he knowed, like he knowed it of anybody they ever knowed."

This had led to the reading of Ingersoll's other books to see what "the durn fellow did know," besides many books of travel and nature.

So far as the children were concerned, I found that Andersen's "Fairy tales" had been in the position of the Teddy bear in the story where the little girl calls up the steps, in a mournful voice, "Mamma, Granny wants Ted when you are through with him."

"Uncle Remus"—well I must admit that they read this first, because Cap'n Jed finding it was my favorite, would never let it stay on the shelves, for if it was there when anyone came in he'd make them take it: "You think we are going to let the Cap'n's book not be read jes' as many times as any uv the books." I think, however, they had caught a taste of it themselves, because they had dubbed one of their number "Bre'r Fox," "Cause he wuz so smart actin' an' was always gittin' left."

"Our mutual friend" Cap'n Jed had read first, and he had forced it on his friends just like he did the "Cap'n's book."

I was hopeful, however, when I found that they had really read it, because you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. Cap'n Jed's comment was: "Silas Wegg was sho' er pill; but didn't old Boffin

han' him er lemon." The summer visitors had left their trail in slang.

Pyle and Verne need no explanation. Verne, however, created as heated a debate as to the authenticity of his facts as did Ingersoll. They agreed that "Them that hankered after plain facts better stick to Ingersoll; but for a hair raiser give 'em Verne."

How strongly the little book "He knew Lincoln" had affected them was voiced simply and pathetically by an old, old man, who nodded his head slowly and said, looking in the fire: "I wish I had er knowed him that er way." The amount of history and biography this little book had led them to read was wonderful. It had caused, directly and indirectly, the circulation of 62 books.

"Una and the Red Cross Knight" was a shot at long range, but it had hit the mark. One old man liked the poetry in it, because it was so full of fine, strange words that you could say over and over to yourself until they made pictures for you. From their comments I could see that the story, with its weird adventures, uncanny spirits, gruesome apparitions, brave deeds and touch of old religion, had appealed most powerfully to these grown-up children. One old woman, with a fine belief in "once upon a time," assured me that these things used to be. A picture of Una and the lion now hangs on the library walls.

Van Dyke's "First Christmas tree" had taken a wonderful hold upon them. They seemed truly to have grasped much of the beauty and spirituality of it, for when one of them said, "After you read it you can shut your eyes when the wind's blowing so hard outside and it will all come over you again like something you saw once just so beautiful and good, it makes you want to cry." Was she not trying to say

that it was "an exquisite word picture, full of the essence of spirituality?"

Munchausen they liked because he "was certainly the biggest liar you ever hearn tell of, en then, besides, he was such a good liar you didn't know sometimes whether he was lyin' or whether maybe he wuz tellin' the truth, and you wuz such a plain ijiot you didn't know he wuz er tellin' it." This book had led to the circulation of 36 books of travel and adventure.

Their strain of superstition and mysticism had found delight in the "Stories from Wagner." They, in whom the fog, loneliness and unfathomable riddle of the sea had bred many strange beliefs, revelled in the spirits that rode the storm, the mysteries that rose from the sea, the ghostly ship and her ghostly crew.

Of the stories, however, "Tristan and Isolde," "Lohengrin" and the "Mastersingers of Nuremburg" appealed to them not at all. Stevenson's "Treasure Island" would have stood higher in the list if the first readers had not held it so long for re-reading, for,

Sailor tales and sailor tunes,
Storm, adventures, heat and cold,
Schooners, islands and maroons,
Buccaneers and buried gold,
Pleased them as they pleased the child of old.

They sang for me "Fourteen men on a dead man's chest" with a gusto and effect rather gruesomely realistic.

Their view of Scott's "Talisman" was most interesting; to a man almost those who read it disliked Edith Plantagenet and Berengaria, and frankly acknowledged to skipping the parts about them if they could. "They was always making trouble, going mooning around, dropping rosebuds, and taking a man away from where he ought to be." They liked Sa-

ladin best of all the men. "By jiminy, he cut a veil in two while it was er floatin' in the air. Anybody cud chop with an axe." (Alas for Richard Coeur de Lion.) It seemed to me that this dislike of theirs for Scott's women was a rare criticism of these rather wax-like heroines.

Ball's "Star-land" had also caused much discussion and nightly gatherings on the beach in clear weather to prove the "gol dasted book." In the main they said he was right.

Now I am going to admit that there is another side to this story of mine, just as there is to every piece of tapestry. The wrong side shows the mistakes, the dropped stitches and the joining of the colors. If you get close you can perhaps find faults on the right side. I have put the right side of my garment before you, just as none of you would wear a coat wrong side out in order to discourage your friends from buying one by showing the alterations and little devices to make it fit. In fact, there is a lining in the coat to keep these very things from showing should the coat by any chance become turned. However, just as a friend might take another friend aside and show him the inside of his coat without its lining, with his devices and rough seams showing plainly, so that the friend *may not become discouraged* if his own coat looks like that before it is lined, I am going to turn the story for one moment.

Some of my 472 books, while they had not missed fire altogether, certainly had not hit the very center of the bull's eye. All of the people had read some book, but a few of them had read only one, more only two or three. Some of them who had read, and with enjoyment perhaps, could not tell why they enjoyed them or even why they read them and had forgotten the books. Some of them liked only the simplest books.

Some of them liked a book for a quality I had not sensed in it, and could not find the quality which I liked and thought they would like.

Now that you have had a glimpse of the wrong side I quickly turn the coat again.

I was more than pleased with the meeting and result of my experiment. It certainly proved to my satisfaction that the great element of success in library work is the fitting of your books to your people. And to do this you must study your books and your people, both collectively and individually, one as related to the other. Then you must study your books as related to each other, so that every one of your collection shall fit in together as perfectly as the bits of marble in a piece of mosaic. There need be no sameness, for the more diverse the bits of color and shapes that go to make up a mosaic the more beautiful and valuable the work is when complete. Then your library as a whole should be constructed to fit your community, just as the mosaic itself is constructed to fit a special place in the building; and if this is done in the end it will fit in its place perfectly.

If you have ever watched an artist constructing with bits of cold stone a beautiful living picture you know that he works faithfully and carefully on the pattern from the wrong side and while he is working every inequality, every tint a little too dull is apparent to him as his picture grows, but he works on and on. And even when he finishes at last and looks down at the completed pattern he is not discouraged to see here a little crevice and there a little roughness, an open seam here, a tiny patch there where the bit of marble was too small. Now he pours his cement over it and smoothes it into every seam, and with faith puts his work to dry. Next day the pattern is turned and the perfect whole is given to view, needing only the

polishing of a loving hand to make it ready to slip in place. So we should work faithfully on our pattern, cement it together with ourselves, and polish it with human kindness; and lo! the work slips into place seemingly a perfect whole.

A few statistics to show what my results actually were from the books considered above as they were annotated. They had led in all to the circulation of 478 picked books, every one of which had been read to some degree intelligently. Of this number 58 per cent was travel, history and biography, 12 was nature and science, 10 mythology, literature and miscellaneous, and 20 per cent fiction. An average of 63 per cent of the books that were on the lists in the back of other books had been read and there was not a single book listed that had not been read by some one.

This was the place and these the men and the books.



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