

PART I--LETTERS

BOOKS--1905.

I.

"I have not read this author's books, and if I have read them I have forgotten what they were about."

These words are reported as having been uttered in our midst not a hundred years ago, publicly, from the seat of justice, by a civic magistrate. The words of our municipal rulers have a solemnity and importance far above the words of other mortals, because our municipal rulers more than any other variety of our governors and masters represent the average wisdom, temperament, sense and virtue of the community. This generalisation, it ought to be promptly said in the interests of eternal justice (and recent friendship), does not apply to the United States of America. There, if one may believe the long and helpless indignations of their daily and weekly Press, the majority of municipal rulers appear to be thieves of a particularly irrepressible sort. But this by the way. My concern is with a statement issuing from the average temperament and the average wisdom of a great and wealthy community, and uttered by a civic magistrate obviously without fear and without reproach.

I confess I am pleased with his temper, which is that of prudence. "I have not read the books," he says, and immediately he adds, "and if I have read them I have forgotten." This is excellent caution. And I like his style: it is unartificial and bears the stamp of manly sincerity. As a reported piece of prose this declaration is easy to read and not difficult to believe. Many books have not been read; still more have been forgotten. As a piece of civic oratory this declaration is strikingly effective. Calculated to fall in with the bent of the popular mind, so familiar with all forms of forgetfulness, it has also the power to stir up a subtle emotion while it starts a train of thought--and what greater force can be expected from human speech? But it is in naturalness that this declaration is perfectly delightful, for there is nothing more natural than for a grave City Father to forget what the books he has read once--long ago--in his giddy youth maybe--were about.

And the books in question are novels, or, at any rate, were written as novels. I