Loafing

When the golden Summer has rounded languidly to his close, when Autumn has been carried forth in russet winding-sheet, then all good fellows who look upon holidays as a chief end of life return from moor and stream and begin to take stock of gains and losses. And the wisest, realising that the time of action is over while that of reminiscence has begun, realise too that the one is pregnant with greater pleasures than the other -- that action, indeed, is only the means to an end of reflection and appreciation. Wisest of all, the Loafer stands apart supreme. For he, of one mind with the philosopher as to the end, goes straight to it at once; and his happy summer has accordingly been spent in those subjective pleasures of the mind whereof the others, the men of muscle and peeled faces, are only just beginning to taste.

And yet though he may a little despise (or rather pity) them, the Loafer does not dislike nor altogether shun them. Far from it: they are very necessary to him. For ``Suave mari magno'' is the motto of your true Loafer; and it is chiefly by keeping ever in view the struggles and the clamorous jostlings of the unenlightened making holiday that he is able to realise the bliss of his own condition and maintain his self-satisfaction at boiling-point. And so is he never very far away from the track beaten by the hurrying Philistine hoof, but hovers more or less on the edge of it, where, the sole fixed star amidst whirling constellations, he may watch the mad world ``glance, and nod, and hurry by.''

There are many such centres of contemplation along the West Coast of Scotland. Few places are better loafing-ground than a pier, with its tranquil ``lucid interval'' between steamers, the ever recurrent throb of paddle-wheel, the rush and foam of beaten water among the piles, splash of ropes and rumble of gangways, and all the attendant hurry and scurry of the human morrice. Here, tanquam in speculo, the Loafer as he lounges may, by attorney as it were, touch gently every stop in the great organ of the emotions of mortality. Rapture of meeting, departing woe, love at first sight, disdain, laughter, indifference -- he may experience them all, but attenuated and as if he saw them in a dream; as if, indeed, he were Heine's god in dream on a mountain-side. Let the drowsy deity awake and all these puppets, emanations of his dream, will vanish into the nothing whence they came. And these emotions may be renewed each morning; if a fair one sail to-day, be sure that one as fair will land to-morrow. The supply is inexhaustible.

But in the South perhaps the happiest loafing-ground is the gift of Father Thames; for there again the contrast of violent action, with its blisters, perspiration, and the like, throws into fine relief the bliss of ``quietism.'' I know one little village in the upper reaches where loafing may be pushed to high perfection. Here the early hours of the morning are vexed by the voices of boaters making their way down the little street to the river. The most of them go staggering under hampers, bundles of waterproofs, and so forth. Their voices are

clamant of feats to be accomplished: they will row, they will punt, they will paddle, till they weary out the sun. All this the Loafer hears through the open door of his cottage, where in his shirt-sleeves he is dallying with his bacon, as a gentleman should. He is the only one who has had a comfortable breakfast -- and he knows it. Later he will issue forth and stroll down in their track to the bridge. The last of these Argonauts is pulling lustily forth; the river is dotted with evanishing blazers. Upon all these lunatics a pitiless Phoebus shines triumphant. The Loafer sees the last of them off the stage, turns his back on it, and seeks the shady side of the street.

A holy calm possesses the village now; the foreign element has passed away with shouting and waving of banners, and its natural life of somnolency is in evidence at last. And first, as a true Loafer should, let him respectfully greet each several village dog. Arcades ambo -- loafers likewise -- they lie there in the warm dust, each outside his own door, ready to return the smallest courtesy. Their own lords and masters are not given to the exchange of compliments nor to greetings in the market-place. The dog is generally the better gentleman, and he is aware of it; and he duly appreciates the loafer, who is not too proud to pause a moment, change the news, and pass the time of day. He will mark his sense of this attention by rising from his dust-divan and accompanying his caller some steps on his way. But he will stop short of his neighbour's dust-patch; for the morning is really too hot for a shindy. So, by easy stages (the street is not a long one: six dogs will see it out), the Loafer quits the village; and now the world

is before him. Shall he sit on a gate and smoke? or lie on the grass and smoke? or smoke aimlessly and at large along the road? Such a choice of happiness is distracting; but perhaps the last course is the best -- as needing the least mental effort of selection. Hardly, however, has he fairly started his first daydream when the snappish ``ting'' of a bellkin recalls him to realities. By comes the bicyclist: dusty, sweating, a piteous thing to look upon. But the irritation of the strepitant metal has jarred the Loafer's always exquisite nerves: he is fain to climb a gate and make his way towards solitude and the breezy downs.

Up here all vestiges of a sordid humanity disappear. The Loafer is alone with the south-west wind and the blue sky. Only a carolling of larks and a tinkling from distant flocks break the brooding noonday stillness; above, the wind-hover hangs motionless, a black dot on the blue. Prone on his back on the springy turf, gazing up into the sky, his fleshy integument seems to drop away, and the spirit ranges at will among the tranquil clouds. This way Nirvana nearest lies. Earth no longer obtrudes herself; possibly somewhere a thousand miles or so below him the thing still ``spins like a fretful midge.'' The Loafer knows not nor cares. His is now an astral body, and through golden spaces of imagination his soul is winging her untrammelled flight. And there he really might remain for ever, but that his vagrom spirit is called back to earth by a gentle but resistless, very human summons, -- a gradual, consuming, Pantagruelian, god-like, thirst: a thirst to thank Heaven on. So, with a sigh half of regret, half of anticipation,

he bends his solitary steps towards the nearest inn. Tobacco for one is good; to commune with oneself and be still is truest wisdom; but beer is a thing of deity -- beer is divine.

Later the Loafer may decently make some concession to popular taste by strolling down to the river and getting out his boat. With one paddle out he will drift down the stream: just brushing the flowering rush and the meadow-sweet and taking in as peculiar gifts the varied sweets of even. The loosestrife is his, and the arrow-head: his the distant moan of the weir; his are the glories, amber and scarlet and silver, of the sunset-haunted surface. By-and-by the boaters will pass him homeward-bound. All are blistered and sore: his withers are unwrung. Most are too tired and hungry to see the sunset glories; no corporeal pangs clog his æsthesis -- his perceptive faculty. Some have quarrelled in the day and are no longer on speaking terms; he is at peace with himself and with the whole world. Of all that lay them down in the little village that night, his sleep will be the surest and the sweetest. For not even the blacksmith himself will have better claim to have earned a night's repose.

Cheap Knowledge

When at times it happens to me that I 'gin to be aweary of the sun, and to find the fair apple of life dust and ashes at the core -- just because, perhaps, I can't afford Melampus Brown's last volume of poems in large paper, but must perforce condescend upon the two-and-sixpenny

edition for the million -- then I bring myself to a right temper by recalling to memory a sight which now and again in old days would touch the heart of me to a happier pulsation. In the long, dark winter evenings, outside some shop window whose gaslight flared brightest into the chilly street, I would see some lad -- sometimes even a girl -- book in hand, heedless of cold and wet, of aching limbs and straining eyes, careless of jostling passers-by, of rattle and turmoil behind them and about, their happy spirits far in an enchanted world: till the ruthless shopman turned out the gas and brought them rudely back to the bitter reality of cramped legs and numbed fingers. ``My brother!'' or ``My sister!'' I would cry inwardly, feeling the link that bound us together. They possessed, for the hour, the two gifts most precious to the student -- light and solitude: the true solitude of the roaring street.

Somehow this vision rarely greets me now. Probably the Free Libraries have supplanted the flickering shop lights; and every lad and lass can enter and call for Miss Braddon and batten thereon ``in luxury's sofa-lap of leather''; and of course this boon is appreciated and profited by, and we shall see the divine results in a year or two. And yet sometimes, like the dear old Baron in the ``Red Lamp,'' ``I wonder?''

For myself, public libraries possess a special horror, as of lonely wastes and dragon-haunted fens. The stillness and the heavy air, the feeling of restriction and surveillance, the mute presence of these

other readers, ``all silent and all damned,'' combine to set up a nervous irritation fatal to quiet study. Had I to choose, I would prefer the windy street. And possibly others have found that the removal of checks and obstacles makes the path which leads to the divine mountain-tops less tempting, now that it is less rugged. So full of human nature are we all -- still -- despite the Radical missionaries that labour in the vineyard. Before the National Gallery was extended and rearranged, there was a little ``St Catherine'' by Pinturicchio that possessed my undivided affections. In those days she hung near the floor, so that those who would worship must grovel; and little I grudged it. Whenever I found myself near Trafalgar Square with five minutes to spare I used to turn in and sit on the floor before the object of my love, till gently but firmly replaced on my legs by the attendant. She hangs on the line now, in the grand new room; but I never go to see her. Somehow she is not my ``St Catherine'' of old. Doubtless Free Libraries affect many students in the same way: on the same principle as that now generally accepted -- that it is the restrictions placed on vice by our social code which make its pursuit so peculiarly agreeable.

But even when the element of human nature has been fully allowed for, it remains a question whether the type of mind that a generation or two of Free Libraries will evolve is or is not the one that the world most desiderates; and whether the spare reading and consequent fertile thinking necessitated by the old, or gas-lamp, style is not productive of sounder results. The cloyed and congested mind resulting from the

free run of these grocers' shops to omnivorous appetites (and all young readers are omnivorous) bids fair to produce a race of literary resurrection-men: a result from which we may well pray to be spared. Of all forms of lettered effusiveness that which exploits the original work of others and professes to supply us with right opinions thereanent is the least wanted. And whether he take to literary expression by pen or only wag the tongue of him, the grocer's boy of letters is sure to prove a prodigious bore. The Free Library, if it be fulfilling the programme of its advocates, is breeding such as he by scores.

But after all there is balm in Gilead; and much joy and consolation may be drawn from the sorrowful official reports, by which it would appear that the patrons of these libraries are confining their reading, with a charming unanimity, exclusively to novels. And indeed they cannot do better; there is no more blessed thing on earth than a good novel, not the least merit of which is that it induces a state of passive, unconscious enjoyment, and never frenzies the reader to go out and put the world right. Next to fairy tales -- the original world-fiction -- our modern novels may be ranked as our most precious possessions; and so it has come to pass that I shall now cheerfully pay my five shillings, or ten shillings, or whatever it may shortly be, in the pound towards the Free Library: convinced at last that the money is not wasted in training exponents of the subjectivity of this writer and the objectivity of that, nor in developing fresh imitators of dead discredited styles, but is righteously devoted to the support

of wholesome, honest, unpretending novel-reading.