

ON DESTROYING BOOKS

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It says in the paper that over two million volumes have been presented to the troops by the public. It would be interesting to inspect them. Most of them, no doubt, are quite ordinary and suitable; but it was publicly stated the such as magazines twenty years old, guides to the Lake District, and back numbers of Whitaker's Almanac. In some cases, one imagines, such indigestibles get into the parcels by accident; but it is likely that there are those who jump at the opportunity of getting rid of books they don't want. Why have they kept them if they don't want them? But most people, especially non-bookish people, are very reluctant to throw away anything that looks like a book. In the most illiterate houses that one knows every worthless volume that is bought finds its way to a shelf and stays there. In reality it is not merely absurd to keep rubbish merely because it is printed: it is positively a public duty to destroy it. Destruction not merely makes more room for new books but saves one's heirs the trouble of sorting out the rubbish or storing it.

But it is not always easy to destroy books. They may not have as many lives as a cat, but they certainly die hard: and it is sometimes difficult to find a scaffold for them. This difficulty once brought me almost within the shadow of the Rope. I was living in a small and (as Shakespeare would say) heaven-kissing flat in Chelsea, and books of inferior, minor verse gradually accumulated there until at last I was faced with alternative of either evicting the books or else leaving them in sole, undisturbed tenancy and taking rooms elsewhere for myself. Now no one would have bought these books. I therefore had to throw them away or wipe them off the map altogether. But how? There were scores of them. I had no kitchen range, and I could not toast them on the gas-cooker or consume them leaf by leaf in my small study fire – for it is almost as hopeless to try to burn a book without opening it as to try to burn a piece of granite. So in the end I determined to do to them what so many people do to the kittens: tie them up and consign them to the river. I improvised a sack, stuffed the books into it, put it over my shoulder, and went down the stairs into the darkness.

It was nearly midnight as I stepped into the street. There was a cold nip in the air, the sky was full of stars: and the greenish-yellow lamps threw long gleams across the smooth, hard road. Few people were about, and here and there rang out the steps of solitary travelers on the way home across the bridge to Battersea. I turned up my overcoat collar, settled my sack comfortably across my shoulders, and strode off towards the little square glow of the coffee-stall which marked the near end of the bridge, whose sweeping iron girders were just visible against the dark sky behind. A few doors down I passed a policeman who was flashing his lantern on the catches of basement windows. He turned. I fancied he looked suspicious, and I trembled slightly. The thought occurred to me: "Perhaps he suspects I have swag in this

sack." I was not seriously disturbed as I knew that I could bear investigation, and that nobody would be suspected of having stolen such goods (though they were all first editions) as I was carrying. Nevertheless I could not help the slight unease which comes to all who are eyed suspiciously by the police, and to all who are detected in any deliberately furtive act, however harmless. He acquitted me, apparently; and with a step that, making an effort, I prevented from growing more rapid, I walked on until I reached the Embankment.

It was then that all the implications of my act revealed themselves. I leaned against the parapet and looked down into the faintly luminous swirls of the river. Suddenly I heard a step near me; quite automatically I sprang back from the wall and began walking on with, I fervently hoped, an air of rumination and unconcern. The pedestrian came by me without looking at me. It was a tramp who had other things to think about; and, calling myself an ass, I stopped again. "Now for it," I thought; but just as I was preparing to cast my books upon the waters I heard another step – a slow and measured one. The next thought came like a blaze of terrible blue lightening across my brain: "What about the splash?" A man leaning at midnight over the Embankment wall; a sudden fling of his arms: a great splash in the water. Surely, and not without reason, whoever was within sight and hearing (and there always seemed to be some one near) would at once rush at me and seize me. In all probability they would think it was a baby. What on earth would be the good of telling a London constable that I had come out into the cold and come down alone to the river to get rid of a pack of poetry? I could almost hear his gruff, sneering laugh: "You tell that to the Marines, my son!"

So far I do not know how long I strayed up and down, increasingly fearful of being watched, summoning up my courage to take the plunge and quailing from it at the last moment. At last I did it. In the middle of Chelsea Bridge there are projecting circular bays with seats in them. In my agony of decision I left the Embankment and hastened straight for the first of these. When I reached it I knelt on the seat. Looking over, I hesitated again. But I had reached the turning-point. "What!" I thought savagely, "under the resolute mask that you show your friends is there really a shrinking and contemptible coward? If you fall now, you must never hold your head up again. Anyhow, what if you are hanged for it? Good God: you worm, better men than you have gone to the gallows." With the courage of despair I took a heave. The sack dropped sheer. A vast splash. Then silence fell again. No one came. I turned home; and as I walked I thought a little sadly of all those books falling into the cold torrent, settling slowly down through the pitchy dark, and subsiding at last on the ooze of the bottom, there to lie forlorn and forgotten whilst the unconscious world of men went on.

Horrible bad books, poor innocent books, you are lying there still: covered, perhaps, with mud by this time, with only a stray rag of your sacking sticking out of the slime into the opaque brown tides. Odes to Diana, Sonnets to Ethel, Dramas on the Love of Lancelot, Stanzas on a First Glimpse of Venice, you lie there in a living death, and your fate is perhaps worse than you deserved.

NOTES

Words Explained:

Whitaker's

- Almanac :** It is a compendium of general information regarding the government, finance, population and commerce of the world, with special reference to the British Empire and the United States, besides being an almanac in the ordinary sense. Almanac is a calendar.
- indigestibles :** books that cannot be easily digested; dull, hard to understand
- reluctant :** unwilling
- sort out :** put into different groups according to size, quality
- shadow of the rope :** fear of being hanged
- evict :** expel from house, etc., by legal process
- accumulate :** get together by additions
- kitchen range :** fireplace for cooking
- consume them :** destroy as by fire
- granite :** hard grey stone
- consign :** give up to
- cold nip in the air :** feeling of cold
- swag :** stolen goods
- investigation :** inquiry
- furtive :** secret, not open
- swirls :** circling motion of water, air, etc.
- automatically :** unconsciously
- rumination :** absorbed in thought
- unconcern :** easy in mind
- pedestrian :** going on foot, a person walking
- tramp :** person who goes from place to place and does no regular work
- measured step :** slow regular steps
- gruff, sneering**
- laugh :** rough, unpleasing in voice, sneering laugh, smile unkindly
- tell that to the marines :** a phrase that expresses disbelief and ridicule
- strayed :** wandered
- quailing :** being cowed, afraid

agony :	great pain of mind or body
resolute mask	
... coward :	make a show of being brave but are a coward at heart
heave :	lifting something heavy
ooze :	wet, liquid mud
forlorn :	unhappy, uncared for
slime :	mud
opaque :	not letting light through

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS

1. What sort of books were presented by the British public to soldiers?
2. Was it interest of soldiers that prompted their action, or was it the wish to get rid of useless books?
3. Why should bad books be destroyed?
4. Why is it difficult to destroy books?
5. Why could not the author burn the unwanted books?
6. How did he decide to get rid of them?
7. Describe the author's midnight venture to throw the books in the river and the suspicions which his action were likely to arouse.
8. How did he muster up courage at last to fling them into the river?
9. Did he come to have a feeling for those books once he had got rid of them?
