

MY FAVOURITE BOOKS

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My favourite books by Robert Blatchford

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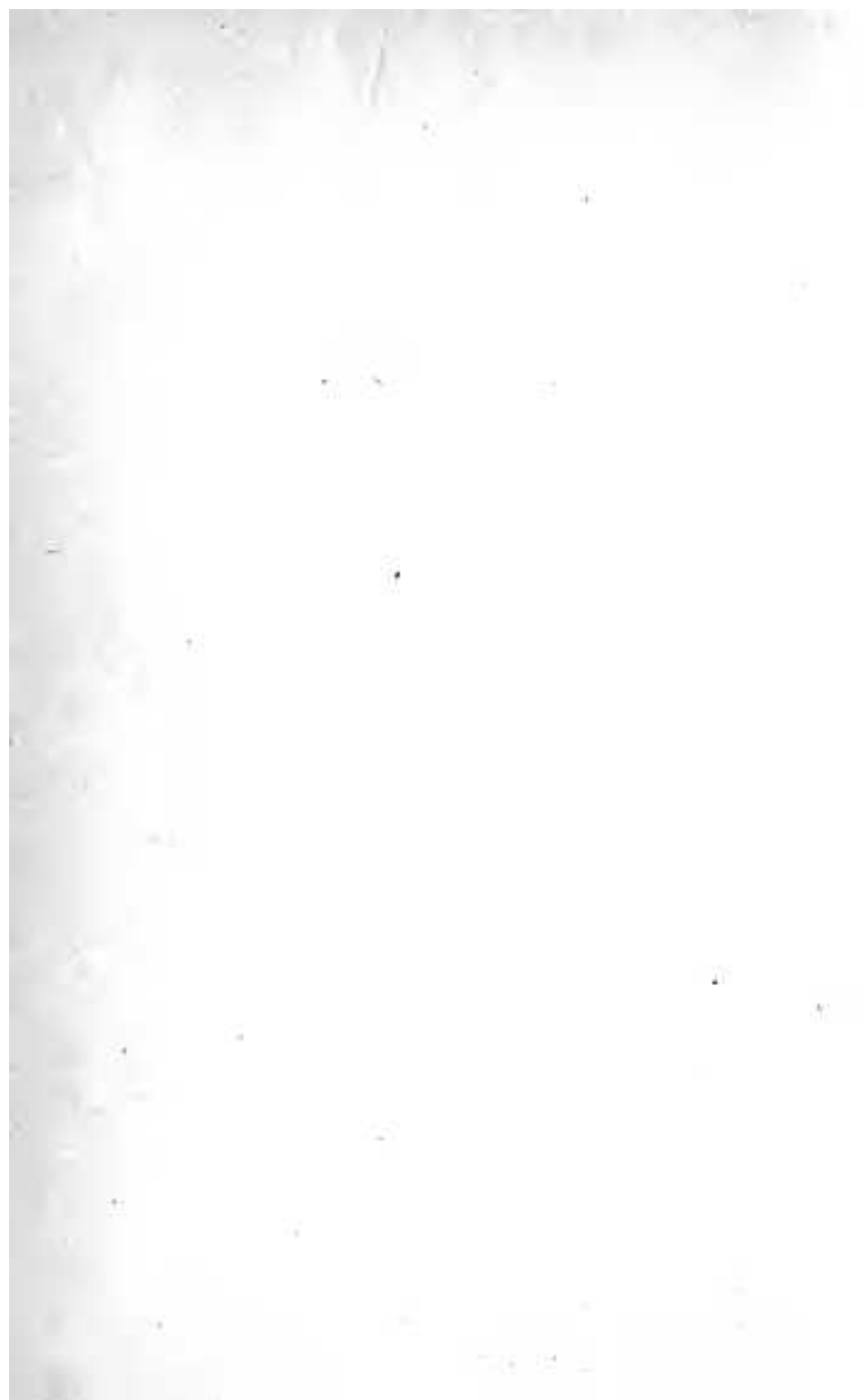
ROBERT BLATCHFORD

**MY FAVOURITE
BOOKS**

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BY
ROBERT BLATCHFORD

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PREFACE

WHEN my friend Blatchford writes a book, how shall I, who know and love the man as Ben Jonson said he loved Shakespeare—how shall I, I repeat, do aught but praise that book?

But to his letter, in the which he asks me to write a preface, he adds a postscript running thus: "You may send [all your praise of this great book to me privately. See?"]

I do not see. Walter Besant wrote a book which he called frankly *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*. I would eulogise my friend. But if I did he would simply "blue" it. So I will keep my praise for my verbal commendations of the volume.

Avoid books about books, says some sententious soul. For myself, I generally

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follow that advice. Here in my book-room I can look round on my favourites—Jefferies, Gilbert White, Isaak Walton, Plato, Dickens, Shakespeare, Ruskin, Burns, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson, Theocritus, Victor Hugo, Charles Reade, Whitman, Longfellow, Carlyle, Emerson, Wordsworth, Cervantes, Scott,—I write them down just as my eye wanders over the titles,—such friends, such brave companions o' nights when the wind howls without and the ways of the world are full of ruts and mire. I need no guide; I am free of the guild. Every one of them looks down on me invitingly. Thank God—and the strong souls who have left them for us—for good books.

But then a saddening thought: how many do need guides in their choice, and help too, to discriminate between good and bad! All have not had my leisure and opportunities. To such, here is a book in a million. Because, while Mr. Blatchford has only taken a few pearls from his treasury, he has selected carefully, has polished his gems till they are resplendent in the colours in which he sees

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them, and has put them against just such a foil and with such a light thrown on them that they needs must appeal to us as to him in their glory and their tenderness and purity.

Every man, as he truly tells us, makes his own selection. Some would cavil at my putting Charles Reade down in my list of favourites. Let such re-read the *Cloister and the Hearth*, and swagger through the world, as I do sometimes when I recall its pages, with the cry on my lips—actually on my lips, sometimes in most unexpected and inappropriate places—“*Courage! mon ami! le diable est mort!*” And after Sir John Lubbock included the *Last Days of Pompeii* in his Hundred Best, surely it may be forgiven to anyone to have some favourites who to other people are caviare.

Read no book because you “ought” to read it. I wasted three years on metaphysics, a “Serbonian bog,” and five on political economy. To-night I sit with my favourites round me, and as I cannot find time to read, with my twenty odd scapegraces rushing

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in upon me at every minute of the day, I am fain to take down a volume and rub it tenderly against my cheek. But that is poor consolation for all my wasted years in the Reading Room of the British Museum.

When you get a book that you enjoy, read it aloud. You read more slowly thus; the modern tendency to rush is checked; the memory is strengthened; and you get your author's full measure of power or beauty. *Read aloud.* I am glad that Blatchford asked me to write this preface. The book will be read by so many of my friends, and this introduction gives me the chance of telling you this. I think I'll repeat it: Read your favourites aloud. Poetry especially is written to be read aloud, or, better, sung. The old skald struck his harp and sung his sagas. Thus you get "songs divine, with a sword in every line," the trenchant blade of which cuts keenly through to the marrow of things, and bites down to the innermost recesses of the skald's mind and your own memory. And those stately sentences of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*! No one