



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Perfect Reader

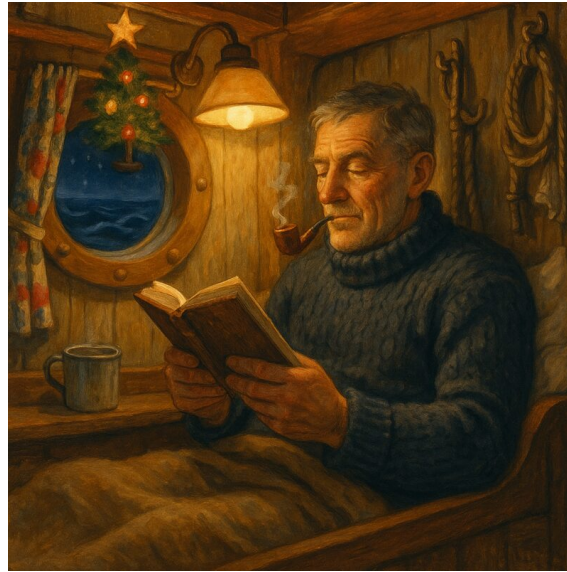
Unknown writer

On Christmas Eve, while the Perfect Reader sits in his armchair immersed in a book — so absorbed that he has let the fire go out — I propose to slip gently down the chimney and leave this tribute in his stocking. It is not a personal tribute. I speak, on behalf of the whole fraternity of writers, this word of gratitude — and envy.

No one who has ever done any writing, or has any ambition toward doing so, can ever be a Perfect Reader. Such a one is not disinterested. He reads, inevitably, in a professional spirit. He does not surrender himself with complete willingness of enjoyment. He reads "to see how the other fellow does it"; to note the turn of a phrase, the cadence of a paragraph; carrying on a constant subconscious comparison with his own work. He broods constantly as to whether he himself, in some happy conjuncture of quick mind and envioning silence and the sudden perfect impulse, might have written something like that. He is (poor devil) confessedly selfish. On every page he is aware of his own mind running with him, tingling him with needle-pricks of conscience for the golden chapters he has never written. And so his reading is, in a way, the perfection of exquisite misery — and his writing also. When he writes, he yearns to be reading; when he reads, he yearns to be writing.

But the Perfect Reader, for whom all fine things are written, knows no such delicate anguish. When he reads, it is without any *arrière-pensée*,* any twingeing* consciousness of self. I like to think of one Perfect Reader of my acquaintance. He is a seafaring man, and this very evening he is in his bunk, at sea, the day's tasks completed. Over his head is a suitable electric lamp. In his mouth is a pipe with that fine wine-dark mahogany sheen that resides upon excellent briar of many years' service. He has had (though I speak only by guess) a rummer* of hot toddy to celebrate the greatest of all Evenings. At his elbow is a porthole, brightly curtained with a scrap of clean chintz, and he can hear the swash of the seas along his ship's tall side. And now he is reading. I can see him reading. I know just how his mind feels! Oh, the Perfect Reader! There is not an allusion that he misses; in all those lovely printed words he sees the subtle secrets that a lesser soul would miss. He (bless his heart!) is not thinking how he himself would have written it; his clear, keen, outreaching mind is intent only to be one in spirit with the invisible and long-dead author. I tell you, if there is anywhere a return of the vanished, it is then, at such moments, over the tilted

book held by the Perfect Reader.



And how quaint it is that he should diminish himself so modestly. "Of course," he says, "I'm only a Reader, and I don't know anything about writing —" Why, you adorable creature. You are our court of final appeal. You are the one we come to, humbly, to know whether, anywhere in our miserable efforts to set out our unruly hearts in parallel lines, we have done an honest thing. What do we care for what (most of) the critics say? They — we know only too well — are not criticising us, but unconsciously themselves. They skew their own dreams into their comment, and blame us for not writing what they once wanted to. You we can trust, for you have looked at life largely and without pettifogg* qualms. The parallel lines of our eager pages meet at Infinity — that is, in the infinite understanding and judgment of the Perfect Reader.

The enjoyment of literature is a personal communion; it cannot be outwardly instilled. The utmost the critic can do is read the marriage service over the reader and the book. The union is consummated, if at all, in secret. But now and then there comes up the aisle a new Perfect Reader, and all the ghosts of literature wait for him, starry-eyed, by the altar. And as long as there are Perfect Readers, who read with passion, with glory, and then speed to tell their friends, there will always be, ever and anon, a Perfect Writer.

And so, dear Perfect Reader, a Merry Christmas to you and a New Year of books worthy your devotion! When you revive from that book that holds you in spell, and find this little note on the cold hearth, I hope you may be pleased.

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