

Philobiblon
by Richard de Bury
(tr. E. C. Thomas, 1888)

Chapter 8. “Of the numerous opportunities we have had of collecting a store of books.

“Since to everything there is a season and an opportunity, as the wise Ecclesiastes witnesseth, let us now proceed to relate the manifold opportunities through which we have been assisted by the divine goodness in the acquisition of books.

“Although from our youth upwards we had always delighted in holding social commune with learned men and lovers of books, yet when we prospered in the world and made acquaintance with the King’s majesty and were received into his household, we obtained ampler facilities for visiting everywhere as we would, and of hunting as it were certain most choice preserves, libraries private as well as public, and of the regular as well as of the secular clergy. And indeed while we filled various offices to the victorious Prince and splendidly triumphant King of England, Edward the Third from the Conquest—whose reign may the Almighty long and peacefully continue—first those about his court, but then those concerning the public affairs of his kingdom, namely the offices of Chancellor and Treasurer, there was afforded to us, in consideration of the royal favor, easy access for the purpose of freely searching the retreats of books. In fact, the fame of our love of them had been soon winged abroad everywhere, and we were reported to burn with such desire for books, and especially old ones, that it was more easy for any man to gain our favor by means of books than of money. Wherefore, since supported by the goodness of the aforesaid prince of worthy memory, we were able to requite a man well or ill, to benefit or injure mightily great as well as small, there flowed in, instead of presents and guerdons, and instead of gifts and jewels, soiled tracts and battered codices, gladsome alike to our eye and heart. Then the aumbries of the most famous monasteries were thrown open, cases were unlocked and caskets were undone, and volumes that had slumbered through long ages in their tombs wake up and are astonished, and those that had lain hidden in dark places are bathed in the ray of unwonted light. These long lifeless books, once most dainty, but now become corrupt and loathsome, covered with litters of mice and pierced with the gnawings of the worms, and who were once clothed in purple and fine linen, now lying in sackcloth and ashes, given up to oblivion, seemed to have become habitations of the moth. Natheless among these, seizing the opportunity, we would sit down with more delight than a fastidious physician among his stores of gums and spices, and there we found the object and the stimulus of our affections. Thus the sacred vessels of learning came into our control and stewardship; some by gift, others by purchase, and some lent to us for a season.

“No wonder that when people saw that we were contented with gifts of this kind, they were anxious of their own accord to minister to our needs with those things that they were more willing to dispense with than the things they secured by ministering to our service. And in good will we strove so to forward their affairs that gain accrued to them, while justice suffered no disparagement. Indeed, if we had loved gold and silver goblets, high-bred horses, or no small sums of money, we might in those days have furnished

forth a rich treasury. But in truth we wanted manuscripts not moneyscripts; we loved codices more than florins, and preferred slender pamphlets to pampered palfreys.

“Besides all this, we were frequently made ambassador of this most illustrious Prince of everlasting memory, and were sent on the most various affairs of state, now to the Holy See, now to the Court of France, and again to various powers of the world, on tedious embassies and in times of danger, always carrying with us, however, that love of books which many waters could not quench. For this like a delicious draught sweetened the bitterness of our journeyings and after the perplexing intricacies and troublesome difficulties of causes, and the all but inextricable labyrinths of public affairs afforded us a little breathing space to enjoy a balmier atmosphere.

“O Holy God of gods in Sion, what a mighty stream of pleasure made glad our hearts whenever we had leisure to visit Paris, the Paradise of the world, and to linger there; where the days seemed ever few for the greatness of our love! There are delightful libraries, more aromatic than stores of spicery; there are luxuriant parks of all manner of volumes; there are Academic meads shaken by the tramp of scholars; there are lounges of Athens; walks of the Peripatetics; peaks of Parnassus; and porches of the Stoics...there indeed opening our treasures and unfastening our purse-strings we scattered money with joyous heart and purchased inestimable books...how good and how pleasant it is to gather together the arms of the clerical warfare, that we may have the means to crush the attacks of heretics, if they arise.

“Further, we are aware that we obtained most excellent opportunities of collecting in the following way. From our early years we attached to our society with the most exquisite solicitude and discarding all partiality all such masters and scholars and professors in the several faculties as had become most distinguished by their subtlety of mind and the fame of their learning. Deriving consolation from their sympathetic conversation, we were delightfully entertained, now by demonstrative chains of reasoning, now by the recital of physical processes and the treatises of the doctors of the Church, now by stimulating discourses on the allegorical meanings of things, as by a rich and well-varied intellectual feast. Such men we chose as comrades in our years of learning, as companions in our chamber, as associates on our journeys, as guests at our table, and, in short, as helpmates in all the vicissitudes of life. But as no happiness is permitted to endure for long, we were sometimes deprived of the bodily companionship of some of these shining lights, when justice looking down from heaven, the ecclesiastical preferments and dignities that they deserved fell to their portion. And thus it happened, as was only right, that in attending to their own cures they were obliged to absent themselves from attendance upon us.

“We will add yet another very convenient way by which a great multitude of books old as well as new came into our hands. For we never regarded with disdain or disgust the poverty of the mendicant orders, adopted for the sake of Christ; but in all parts of the world took them into the kindly arms of our compassion, allured them by the most friendly familiarity into devotion to ourselves, and having so allured them cherished them with munificent liberality of beneficence for the sake of God, becoming benefactors of all

of them in general in such wise that we seemed none the less to have adopted certain individuals with a special fatherly affection. To these men we were as a refuge in every case of need, and never refused to them the shelter of our favor, wherefore we deserved to find them most special furtherers of our wishes and promoters thereof in act and deed, who compassing land and sea, traversing the circuit of the world, and ransacking the universities and high schools of various provinces, were zealous in combating for our desires, in the sure and certain hope of reward. What leveret could escape amidst so many keen-sighted hunters? What little fish could evade in turn their hooks and nets and snares? From the body of the Sacred Law down to the booklet containing the fallacies of yesterday, nothing could escape these searchers...

“But whenever it happened that we turned aside to the cities and places where the mendicants we have mentioned had their convents, we did not disdain to visit their libraries and any other repositories of books; nay, there we found heaped up amid the utmost poverty the utmost riches of wisdom. We discovered in their fardels and baskets not only crumbs falling from the masters’ table for the dogs, but the shewbread without leaven and the bread of angels having in it all that is delicious; and indeed the garner of Joseph full of corn, and all the spoil of the Egyptians, and the very precious gifts which Queen Sheba brought to Solomon.

“These men are as ants ever preparing their meat in the summer, and ingenious bees continually fabricating cells of honey...Of these men, when we were raised to the episcopate we had several of both orders, viz., the Preachers and Minors, as personal attendants and companions at our board, men distinguished no less in letters than in morals, who devoted themselves with unwearied zeal to the correction, exposition, tabulation, and compilation of various volumes. But although we have acquired a very numerous store of ancient as well as modern works by the manifold intermediation of the religious, yet we must laud the Preachers with special praise, in that we have found them above all the religious most freely communicative of their stores without jealousy, and proved them to be imbued with an almost Divine liberality, not greedy but fitting possessors of luminous wisdom.

“Besides all the opportunities mentioned above, we secured the acquaintance of stationers and booksellers, not only within our own country, but of those spread over the realms of France, Germany, and Italy, money flying forth in abundance to anticipate their demands; nor were they hindered by any distance or by the fury of the seas, or by the lack of means for their expenses, from sending or bringing to us the books that we required. For they well knew that their expectations of our bounty would not be defrauded, but that ample repayment with usury was to be found with us...

“Moreover, we had always in our different manors no small multitude of copyists and scribes, of binders, correctors, illuminators, and generally of all who could usefully labor in the service of books. Finally, all of both sexes and of every rank or position who had any kind of association with books, could most easily open by their knocking the door of our heart, and find a fit resting-place in our affection and favor. In so much did we receive those who brought books, that the multitude of those who had preceded them did

not lessen the welcome of the after-comers, nor were the favors we had awarded yesterday prejudicial to those of to-day. Wherefore, ever using all the persons we have named as a kind of magnets to attract books, we had the desired accession of the vessels of science and a multitudinous flight of the finest volumes.

“And this is what we undertook to narrate in the present chapter.

17. Of showing due propriety in the custody of books.

“We are not only rendering service to God in preparing volumes of new books, but also exercising an office of sacred piety when we treat books carefully, and again when we restore them to their proper places and commend them to inviolable custody; that they may rejoice in purity while we have them in our hands, and rest securely when they are put back in their repositories. And surely next to the vestments and vessels dedicated to the Lord’s body, holy books deserve to be rightly treated by the clergy, to which great injury is done so often as they are touched by unclean hands. Wherefore we deem it expedient to warn our students of various negligences, which might always be easily avoided and do wonderful harm to books.

“And in the first place as to the opening and closing of books, let there be due moderation, that they be not unclasped in precipitate haste, nor when we have finished our inspection be put away without being duly closed. For it behoves us to guard a book much more carefully than a boot.

“But the race of scholars is commonly badly brought up, and unless they are bridled in by the rules of their elders they indulge in infinite puerilities. They behave with petulance, and are puffed up with presumption, judging of everything as if they were certain, though they are altogether inexperienced.

“You may happen to see some headstrong youth lazily lounging over his studies, and when the winter’s frost is sharp, his nose running from the nipping cold drips down, nor does he think of wiping it with his pocket-handkerchief until he has bedewed the book before him with the ugly moisture. Would that he had before him no book, but a cobbler’s apron! His nails are stuffed with fetid filth as black as jet, with which he marks any passage that pleases him. He distributes a multitude of straws, which he inserts to stick out in different places, so that the halm may remind him of what his memory cannot retain. These straws, because the book has no stomach to digest them, and no one takes them out, first distend the book from its wonted closing, and at length, being carelessly abandoned to oblivion, go to decay. He does not fear to eat fruit or cheese over an open book, or carelessly to carry a cup to and from his mouth; and because he has no wallet at hand he drops into books the fragments that are left. Continually chattering, he is never weary of disputing with his companions, and while he alleges a crowd of senseless arguments, he wets the book lying half open in his lap with sputtering showers. Aye, and then hastily folding his arms he leans forward on the book, and by a brief spell of study invites a prolonged nap; and then, by way of mending the wrinkles, he folds back the margin of the leaves, to the no small injury of the book. Now the rain is over and gone,

and the flowers have appeared in our land. Then the scholar we are speaking of, a neglecter rather than an inspector of books, will stuff his volume with violets, and primroses, with roses and quatrefoil. Then he will use his wet and perspiring hands to turn over the volumes; then he will thump the white vellum with gloves covered with all kinds of dust, and with his finger clad in long-used leather will hunt line by line through the page; then at the sting of the biting flea the sacred book is flung aside, and is hardly shut for another month, until it is so full of the dust that has found its way within, that it resists the effort to close it.

“But the handling of books is specially to be forbidden to those shameless youths, who as soon as they have learned to form the shapes of letters, straightway, if they have the opportunity, become unhappy commentators, and wherever they find an extra margin about the text, furnish it with monstrous alphabets, or if any other frivolity strikes their fancy, at once their pen begins to write it. There the Latinist and sophister and every unlearned writer tries the fitness of his pen, a practice that we have frequently seen injuring the usefulness and value of the most beautiful books...

“Again, it is part of the decency of scholars that whenever they return from meals to their study, washing should invariably precede reading, and that no grease-stained finger should unfasten the clasps, or turn the leaves of a book. Nor let a crying child admire the pictures in the capital letters, lest he soil the parchment with wet fingers; for a child instantly touches whatever he sees. Moreover, the laity, who look at a book turned upside down just as if it were open in the right way, are utterly unworthy of any communion with books. Let the clerk take care also that the smutty scullion reeking from his stewpots does not touch the lily leaves of books, all unwashed, but he who walketh without blemish shall minister to the precious volumes...

“Moses, the gentlest of men, teaches us to make bookcases most neatly, wherein they may be protected from any injury: Take, he says, this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. O fitting place and appropriate for a library, which was made of imperishable shittim-wood, and was all covered within and without with gold! But the Saviour also has warned us by His example against all unbecoming carelessness in the handling of books, as we read in S. Luke. For when He had read the scriptural prophecy of Himself in the book that was delivered to Him, He did not give it again to the minister, until He had closed it with his own most sacred hands. By which students are most clearly taught that in the care of books the merest trifles ought not to be neglected.

19. “Of the manner of lending all our books to students.

“It has ever been difficult so to restrain men by the laws of rectitude, that the astuteness of successors might not strive to transgress the bounds of their predecessors, and to infringe established rules in insolence of licence. Accordingly, with the advice of prudent men, we have prescribed the manner in which we desire that the communication and use of our books should be permitted for the benefit of students.

“Imprimis, we give and grant all and singular the books, of which we have made a special catalogue, in consideration of affection, to the community of scholars living in-Hall at Oxford, as a perpetual gift, for our soul and the souls of our parents, and also for the soul of the most illustrious King Edward the Third from the Conquest, and of the most pious Queen Philippa, his consort: to the intent that the same books may be lent from time to time to all and singular the scholars and masters of the said place, as well regular as secular, for the advancement and use of study, in the manner immediately following, that is to say:

“Five of the scholars sojourning in the Hall aforesaid shall be appointed by the Master thereof, who shall have the charge of all the books, of which five persons three and not fewer may lend any book or books for inspection and study; but for copying or transcribing we direct that no book shall be allowed outside the walls of the house. Therefore, when any scholar secular or religious, whom for this purpose we regard with equal favour, shall seek to borrow any book, let the keepers diligently consider if they have a duplicate of the said book, and if so, let them lend him the book, taking such pledge as in their judgment exceeds the value of the book delivered, and let a record be made forthwith of the pledge and of the book lent, containing the names of the persons delivering the book and of the person who receives it, together with the day and year when the loan is made.

“But if the keepers find that the book asked for is not in duplicate, they shall not lend such book to any one whomsoever, unless he shall belong to the community of scholars of the said Hall, unless perhaps for inspection within the walls of the aforesaid house or Hall, but not to be carried beyond it.

“But to any of the scholars of the said Hall, any book may be lent by three of the aforesaid keepers, after first recording, however, his name, with the day on which he receives the book. Nevertheless, the borrower may not lend the book entrusted to him to another, except with the permission of three of the aforesaid keepers, and then the name of the first borrower being erased, the name of the second with the time of delivery is to be recorded.

“Each keeper shall take an oath to observe all these regulations when they enter upon the charge of the books. And the recipients of any book or books shall thereupon swear that they will not use the book or books for any other purpose but that of inspection or study, and that they will not take or permit to be taken it or them beyond the town and suburbs of Oxford.

“Moreover, every year the aforesaid keepers shall render an account to the Master of the House and two of his scholars whom he shall associate with himself, or if he shall not be at leisure, he shall appoint three inspectors, other than the keepers, who shall peruse the catalogue of books, and see that they have them all, either in the volumes themselves or at least as represented by deposits. And the more fitting season for rendering this account we believe to be from the First of July until the festival of the Translation of the Glorious Martyr S. Thomas next following.

“We add this further provision, that anyone to whom a book has been lent, shall once a year exhibit it to the keepers, and shall, if he wishes it, see his pledge. Moreover, if it chances that a book is lost by death, theft, fraud, or carelessness, he who has lost it or his representative or executor shall pay the value of the book and receive back his deposit. But if in any wise any profit shall accrue to the keepers, it shall not be applied to any purpose but the repair and maintenance of the books.