OWNING BOOKS

by William Lyon Phelps

The habit of reading is one of the greatest resources of mankind; and we enjoy reading books that belong to us much more than they do when borrowed. A borrowed book is like a guest in the house; it must be treated with punctiliousness, with a certain considerate formality. You must see that it sustains no damage; it must not suffer while under your roof. You cannot leave it carelessly; you cannot mark it, you cannot turn down the pages, you cannot use it familiarly. And, although this is seldom done, you ought really to return it.

But your own books belong to you; you treat them with that affectionate intimacy that animates formality. Books are for use, not for show; you should own no book that you are afraid to mark up or afraid to place on the table, wide open and face down. A good reason for marking favorite passages in books is that this practice enables you to remember more easily the significant sayings, to refer to them quickly, and then in later years, it is like visiting a forest where you once blazed a trail. You have the pleasure of going over the old ground, and recalling both the intellectual scenery and your own earlier self.

There are, of course, many things bought now that I may some day regret. Sometimes I think I need a book, only to find that it is so original that I plough through it once and forget it. Sometimes I buy a book and don't find out until I have bought it that I should have got it cheaper from someone who knows about it. But I have bought many books and I have loved and used them. I have found that I can learn to love a book even after I have bought it, and that is perhaps the best reason of all for owning books.

JIMMY'S DAILY TALK

About the Essay Contest

Jimmy is doing his geometry exercises while Mary works on a math problem. Mary: "What's for dinner?"

Jimmy: "I'm not sure. What do you want?"

Mary: "How about pizza?"

Jimmy: "Okay, I'll make it."

Mary: "Thanks! I can't wait to eat it."