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IF I WERE A GIRL AGAIN

I

IF I were a girl again—if some benignant fairy should touch me with her wand and say, *Be a girl again*, and I should feel bursting over me the generous impulses, the enthusiasm, the buoyancy, the ambition, that belong to sixteen—some things I should do, and some things I should not do, to make me at fifty the person whom now at fifty I should like to be.

First of all, I should study self-control—the control of body, of speech, of temper; a power best learned in youth before the current of habit has deepened the channel of self-will and impetuosity that seems to be cut in

If I Were a Girl Again

every human heart. I should count one hundred, like Tattycorum, before I would allow myself to utter unkind, impulsive words; I should scorn to burst into tears because of some petty correction or grievance; I should learn to sit quietly, to close a door gently, to walk calmly, even when my thoughts were boiling within me.

I should shun, if I were a girl again, the tendency to be sensitive and suspicious. Because my friend talks to another person, or because a group of acquaintances seem to be enjoying themselves apart from me, I should not fancy myself neglected. I should not construe thoughtlessness into intentional slights, nor abstraction into indifference. I should say oftener to myself, "My friend did not see that I was here; she has not heard of my return; she is busy with her music; she is tired after her journey. I will trust in her friend-

If I Were a Girl Again

ship, just as I would have her trust in mine."

If I were a girl again, I should be more careful about my conversation. I should beware of slang and gossip and a tendency to drop into silence. I should avoid sarcasm like the plague, remembering that the person who uses it shows her sense of her own inferiority. Nobody ever had so many enemies as Disraeli; and it is to be remembered that sarcasm was his most powerful weapon. I should practice the art of such gay repartee as is free from satire and unkindness, learning to tell a story well, and to dwell upon what is kindly and happy. I should be more ready to express my appreciation and thanks for services rendered; be quicker with my praise and tardier with my criticism. I should cultivate a distinct enunciation, enlarge my vocabulary, and remember Lord Chesterfield's dictum "never to utter

If I Were a Girl Again

one word, even in common conversation, that should not be the most expressive with which the language could supply him."

If I were a girl again, I should be a better student. I should worry less over my lessons, and potter less; but I should think as I study, and try to understand statements in one reading rather than by saying them over and over, like a parrot. I should be more thorough, not passing to one lesson until I had mastered the last; and I should be ashamed of poor spelling or illegible handwriting or faulty pronunciation.

I should be more scrupulous about making and keeping engagements; I should be less daunted by obstacles and defeat, and be less, I hope, the slave of petty but annoying habits.

These things I should do if I were a girl again. But suppose I have passed my girlhood! Suppose I am thirty! Still, shall I not at fifty wish

If I Were a Girl Again

that I could retrieve the past twenty years? Should I not employ them differently? Again, say I am fifty. At seventy could I not better use those precious years of preparation? There is always a golden age, soon to be behind us, which at every period of our life is before us—just as to-morrow's yesterday is still to-day. So we may all take courage. It is never too late to mend.

THE VULNER- ABLE HEEL

II

"I CANNOT bear science," a young college girl said, running her finger along the electives, as she and the Dean were arranging her studies for the following year. "I cannot bear it; and I am very stupid at it. I am not so stupid in history; suppose I take that."

"Once there was a mother," replied the Dean, smiling down into the frank eyes fixed upon her, "a mother who wished her son to be immortal. So she dipped him into the river Styx, by which he was made invulnerable except in the heel with which she had held him during the process. One would have thought that Achilles, grown up, would have protected that weak spot—gone wading in the Styx himself, or at least have guarded his heel

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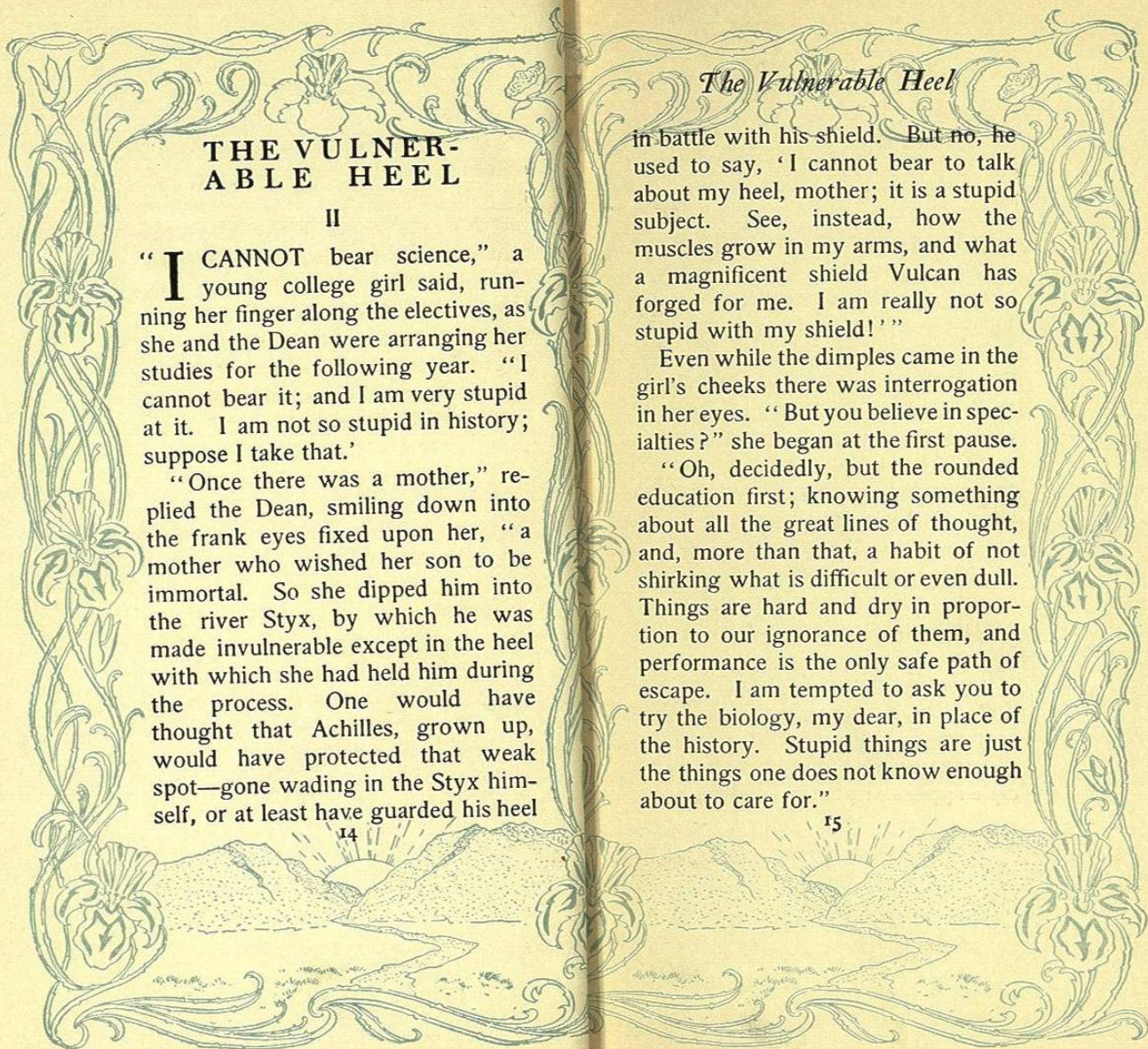
The Vulnerable Heel

in battle with his shield. But no, he used to say, 'I cannot bear to talk about my heel, mother; it is a stupid subject. See, instead, how the muscles grow in my arms, and what a magnificent shield Vulcan has forged for me. I am really not so stupid with my shield!'"

Even while the dimples came in the girl's cheeks there was interrogation in her eyes. "But you believe in specialties?" she began at the first pause.

"Oh, decidedly, but the rounded education first; knowing something about all the great lines of thought, and, more than that, a habit of not shirking what is difficult or even dull. Things are hard and dry in proportion to our ignorance of them, and performance is the only safe path of escape. I am tempted to ask you to try the biology, my dear, in place of the history. Stupid things are just the things one does not know enough about to care for."

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The Vulnerable Heel

The boy who broke the barometer because it had said rain all through his vacation, lost only a prospective pleasure for his pains. By a different selection of sports he might have pressed the rain into his service. Queen Elizabeth, grown old and ugly, caused all mirrors to be banished from her apartments; whereas, the modern woman, knowing her vulnerable points, multiplies her mirrors, studies therein her dress, her walk and her pose, and makes defect to serve her. Louis XV would not allow death to be spoken of in his presence; and, from the very fear that a drive or a conversation might suggest the subject, deprived himself of valuable aids to mental and physical health.

Emerson once made the suggestion that every young person should be encouraged to do what he is afraid to do, and we all know how the principle applies in physical matters. An

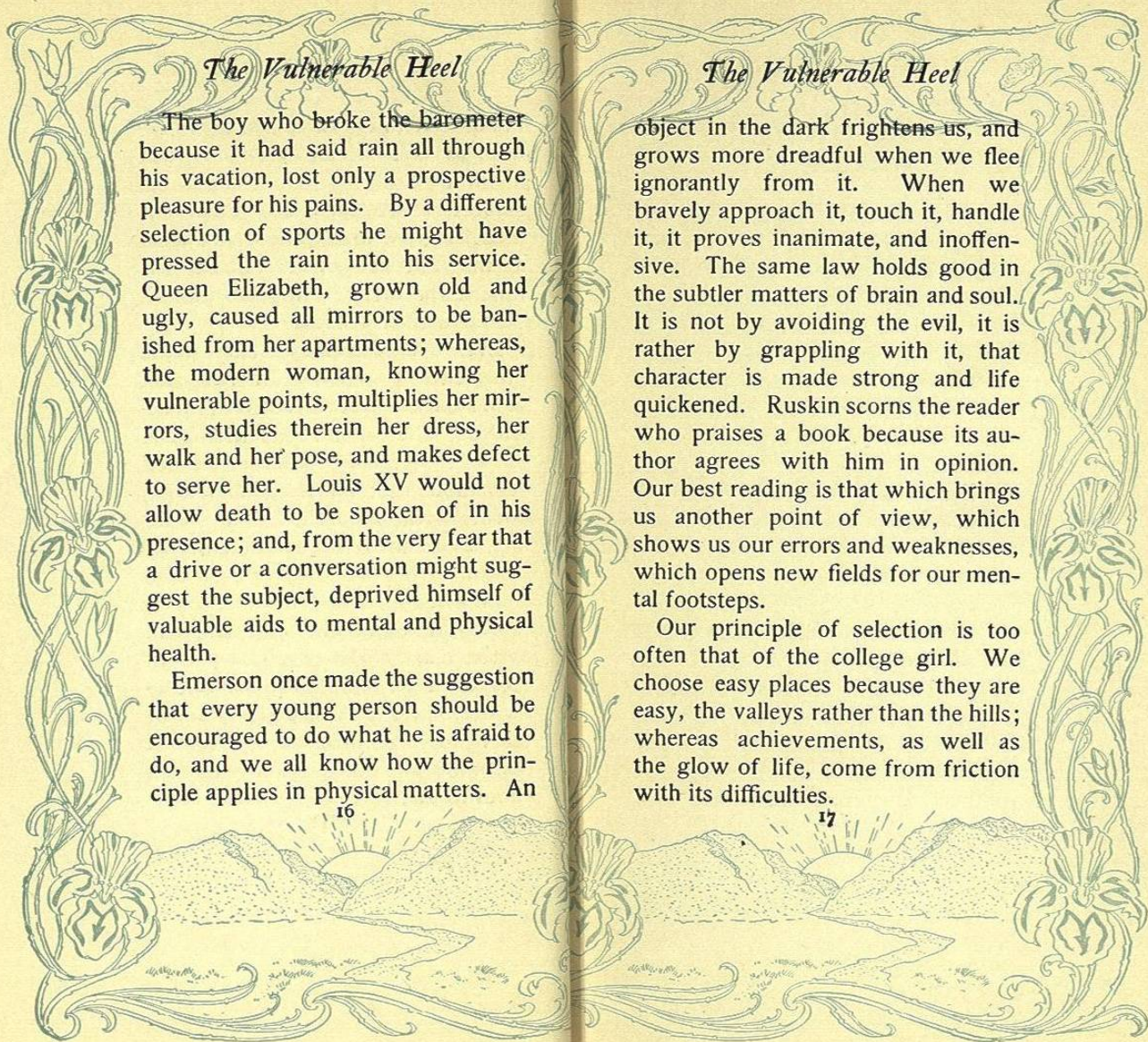
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The Vulnerable Heel

object in the dark frightens us, and grows more dreadful when we flee ignorantly from it. When we bravely approach it, touch it, handle it, it proves inanimate, and inoffensive. The same law holds good in the subtler matters of brain and soul. It is not by avoiding the evil, it is rather by grappling with it, that character is made strong and life quickened. Ruskin scorns the reader who praises a book because its author agrees with him in opinion. Our best reading is that which brings us another point of view, which shows us our errors and weaknesses, which opens new fields for our mental footsteps.

Our principle of selection is too often that of the college girl. We choose easy places because they are easy, the valleys rather than the hills; whereas achievements, as well as the glow of life, come from friction with its difficulties.

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I WONDER WHY?

III

"**B**LOTTING-PAPER for programmes? I wonder why!" and the three girls, after a moment's stare at the unusual spectacle of music programmes printed on moist blotting-paper, dismissed the question from their minds, and began a vigorous use of the programmes as fans.

"Send me a receipt to make me think," writes a young girl; "I cannot follow out things in my own mind. I wonder why!"

"I wonder why! I wonder why!" My dear young ladies, your words are admirable. The trouble is with the punctuation. Exchange the exclamation point for the interrogation, and teach your minds better manners than to ask a question without waiting for a reply. Be severe with

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I Wonder Why?

it. Say: "You want to know? then find out. If not now, tomorrow; and, mind, no sugar-plums of love-stories until your lesson is learned."

A bother? Certainly. Real toil, oftentimes. Nothing worth while comes without toil; but, believe me, these intellectual quests bring forth fruit, some forty, some sixty, yes, some a hundredfold! Rightly pursued, they not simply inform, but educate; they inculcate habits of promptness, thoroughness, and perseverance; necessitate intercourse with books and men; teach discrimination and integrity to the mind; in short, make up a little prescription for that sad disease, the inability to think.

Rightly pursued. Which means not merely shifting the quest on to other minds and imbibing the result. In the world of business accurate answers are more important

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I Wonder Why?

than methods of solution; but in the arithmetic class the answer is important only as a proof. The trained mind may snatch what it needs from any source; but it has won the ability to do so from slow and regular processes.

The mind that does not grow deteriorates. Alice in the Chess Country learned younger than we that it takes all the running one can do to stay in the same place. Every time that we "wonder why" and do not attempt to learn why, the mind makes a backward slip. The thing itself may be unimportant, but the habit and the discipline of mind are of great importance.

So here is a little suggestion for idle days. You wonder whence comes that odd spot of light on the ceiling. Try to think it out where you sit. Is it a direct, reflected, or refracted light? Move an object or two in the room, hold up your hand for a shadow.

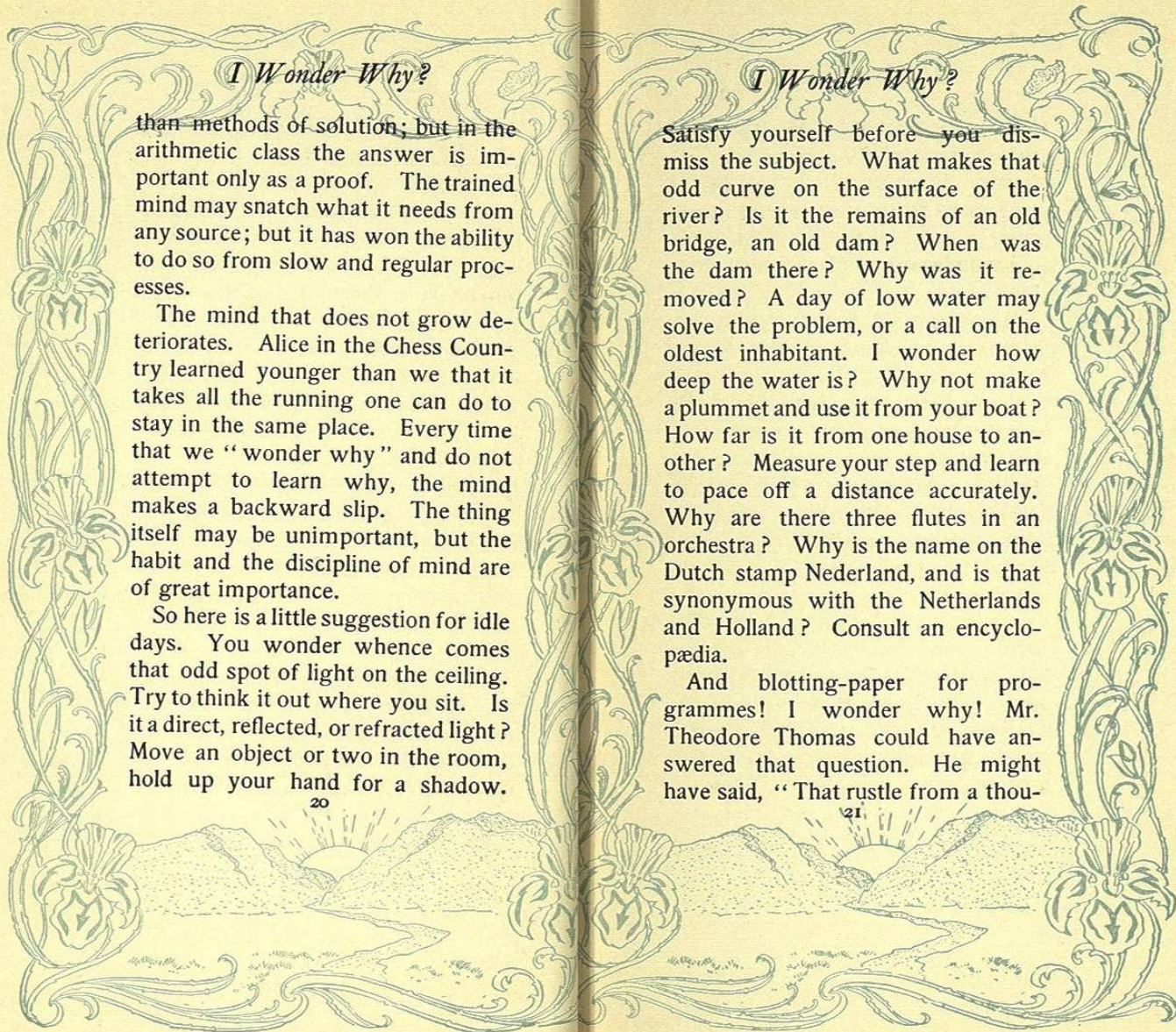
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I Wonder Why?

Satisfy yourself before you dismiss the subject. What makes that odd curve on the surface of the river? Is it the remains of an old bridge, an old dam? When was the dam there? Why was it removed? A day of low water may solve the problem, or a call on the oldest inhabitant. I wonder how deep the water is? Why not make a plummet and use it from your boat? How far is it from one house to another? Measure your step and learn to pace off a distance accurately. Why are there three flutes in an orchestra? Why is the name on the Dutch stamp *Nederland*, and is that synonymous with the Netherlands and Holland? Consult an encyclopædia.

And blotting-paper for programmes! I wonder why! Mr. Theodore Thomas could have answered that question. He might have said, "That rustle from a thou-

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I Wonder Why?

sand stiff papers in careless hands would seriously interfere with the music. It is a trifle, perhaps, but attention to trifles is the secret to success."

I wonder why?

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**SOME REASON
WHY**

IV

A CONTINUOUS stream of persons passed through the Art Gallery and a woman sitting there listened with no small amusement to the comments made upon a certain small portrait by a distinguished American artist. The picture was of a young girl, sitting bolt up-right on a straight-backed chair, a small hard pillow placed stiffly between her back and the chair. The child had on a little blue sack and looked out of the canvas with bright, wistful eyes.

"883. Sargent! Of course. How exactly like him with his continual mannerisms! To pose a poor child in that awkward and difficult position! No girl would ever sit so of her own accord." Such were the frequent expressions of the many.

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Some Reason Why

Finally an elderly woman, beautifully dressed, her face alive with intelligence, came in search of a particular picture. Stopping before the small head she examined it with manifest satisfaction, and turned to her companion with moist eyes. "You know this dear child has a great affliction, a hardening of the spine, so that her back is stiff and this is her habitual posture. She has a lovely character, as one may see shining from these eyes, and Sargent has translated it to the life. Without the pose he has given her, however, something would have seemed lacking. As it is, it is perfect."

The woman on the bench grew thoughtful. Is it always so, she asked herself, that everything has its explanation? that what we condemn as exaggerated or false is simply something we do not yet understand? that our hasty conclusions merely stamp us as ignorant, and that we do

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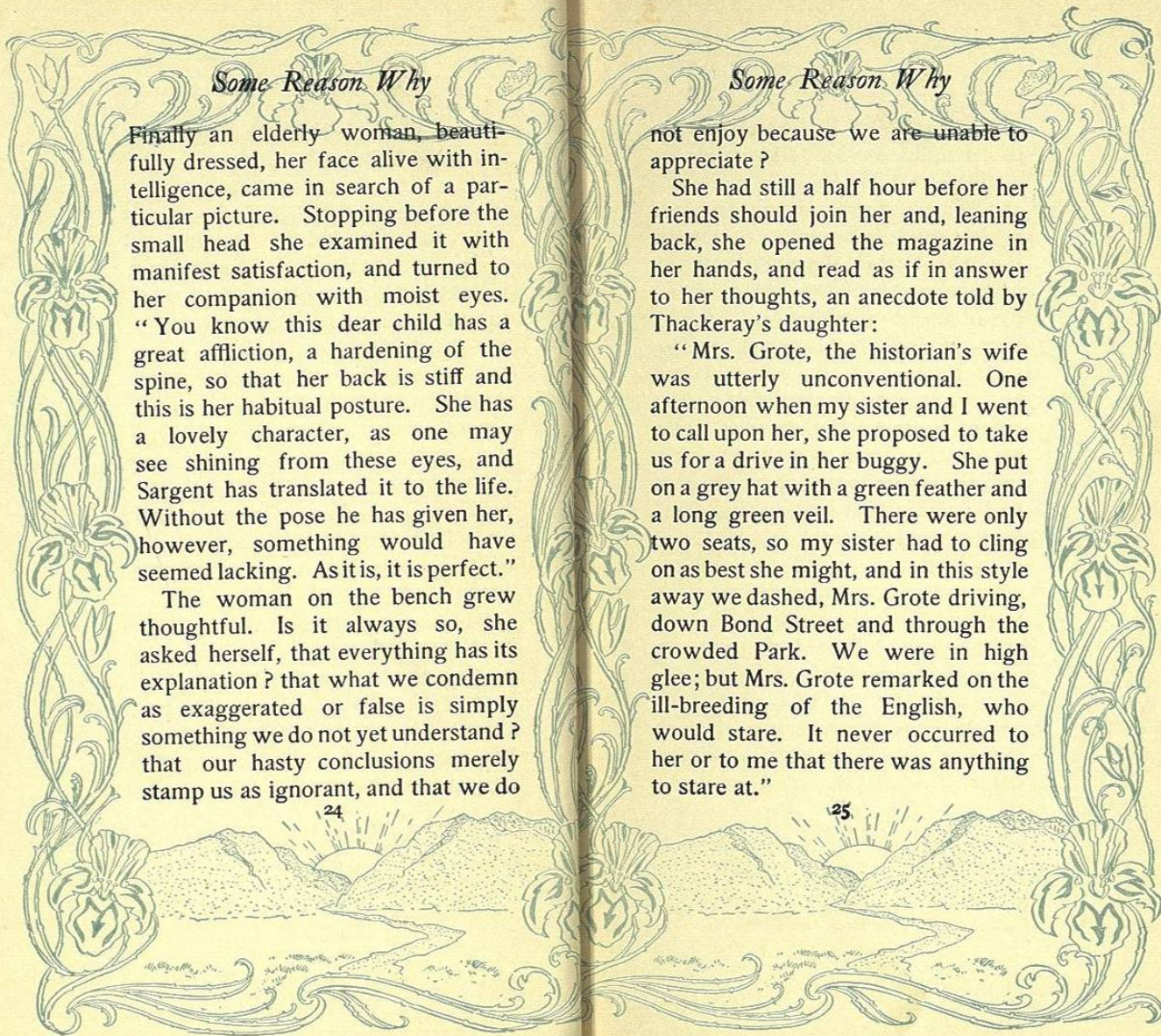
Some Reason Why

not enjoy because we are unable to appreciate?

She had still a half hour before her friends should join her and, leaning back, she opened the magazine in her hands, and read as if in answer to her thoughts, an anecdote told by Thackeray's daughter:

"Mrs. Grote, the historian's wife was utterly unconventional. One afternoon when my sister and I went to call upon her, she proposed to take us for a drive in her buggy. She put on a grey hat with a green feather and a long green veil. There were only two seats, so my sister had to cling on as best she might, and in this style away we dashed, Mrs. Grote driving, down Bond Street and through the crowded Park. We were in high glee; but Mrs. Grote remarked on the ill-breeding of the English, who would stare. It never occurred to her or to me that there was anything to stare at."

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Some Reason Why

Oh yes, Mrs. Grote, the woman murmured to herself; there is always some reason for it. If people stare at you look at yourself in a mirror; if people do not like you, ask yourself if you are likable; if your accounts do not come right, look to your addition; if your neighbour is "luckier" than you, imitate her perseverance or tact; before you stamp a symphony as dull, inquire if you are a competent judge of classical music; before you criticise a portrait think of the possible characteristics of artist and sitter. There is always some reason why.

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BLEACHING THE BRAIN

V

"I CANNOT come now, I am bleaching my brain."

"What, Aunt Jeannette?"

"Bleaching my brain—the grey matter, you know. I cannot come now."

The young girl laughed. She moved about the room, gathering her aunt's wraps as well as her own, and finally asked: "Whose prescription are you using, Fiske's or Anthony Hope's?" She remembered that "The Indiscretions of the Duchess" was in her own private corner, which her aunt had usurped; but she felt rather proud to think that the "Critical Period of American History" was there also, and she asked the question cheerfully, expecting at least a word of commendation.

"Fiske's," came the prompt reply.

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