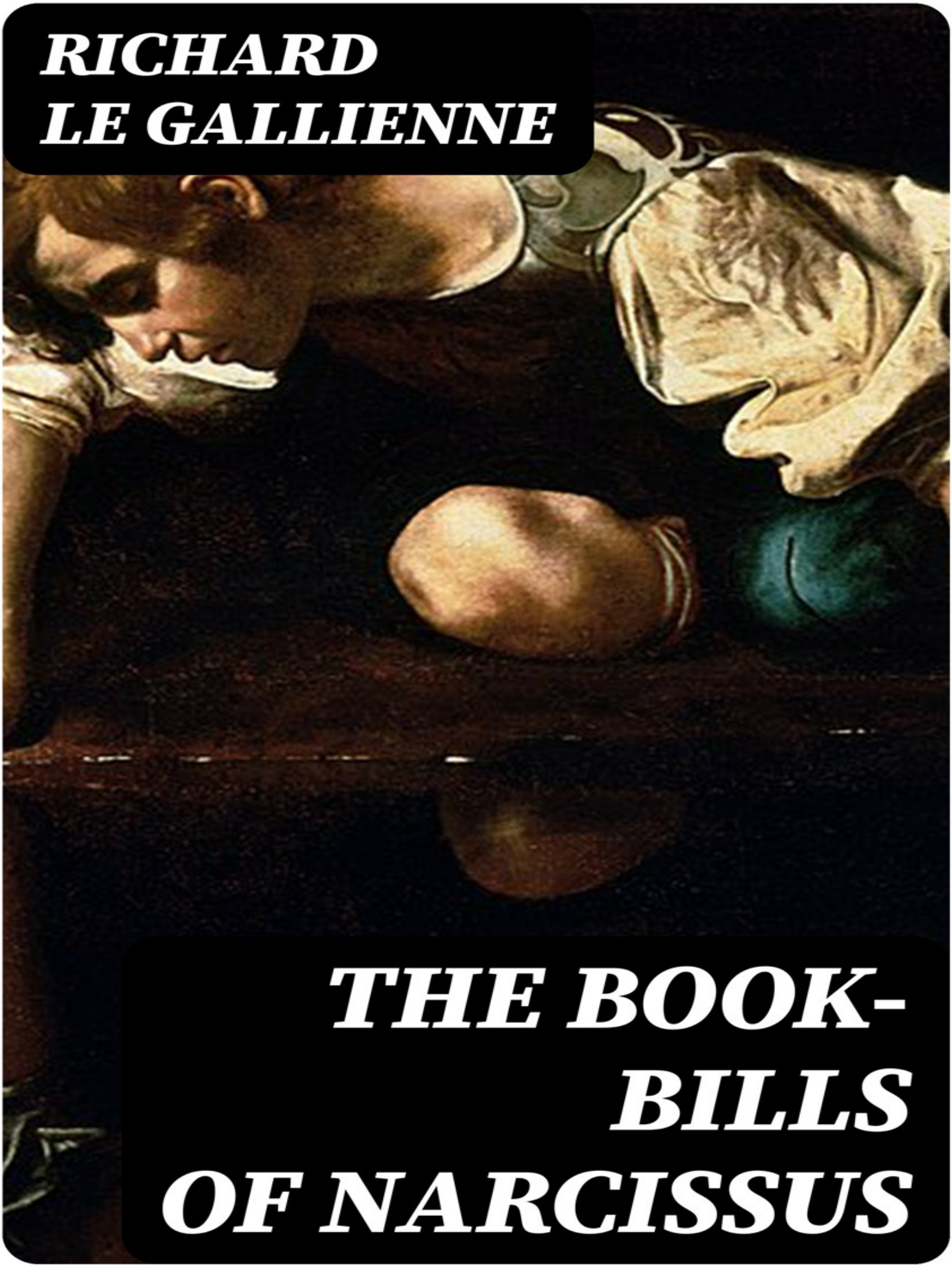
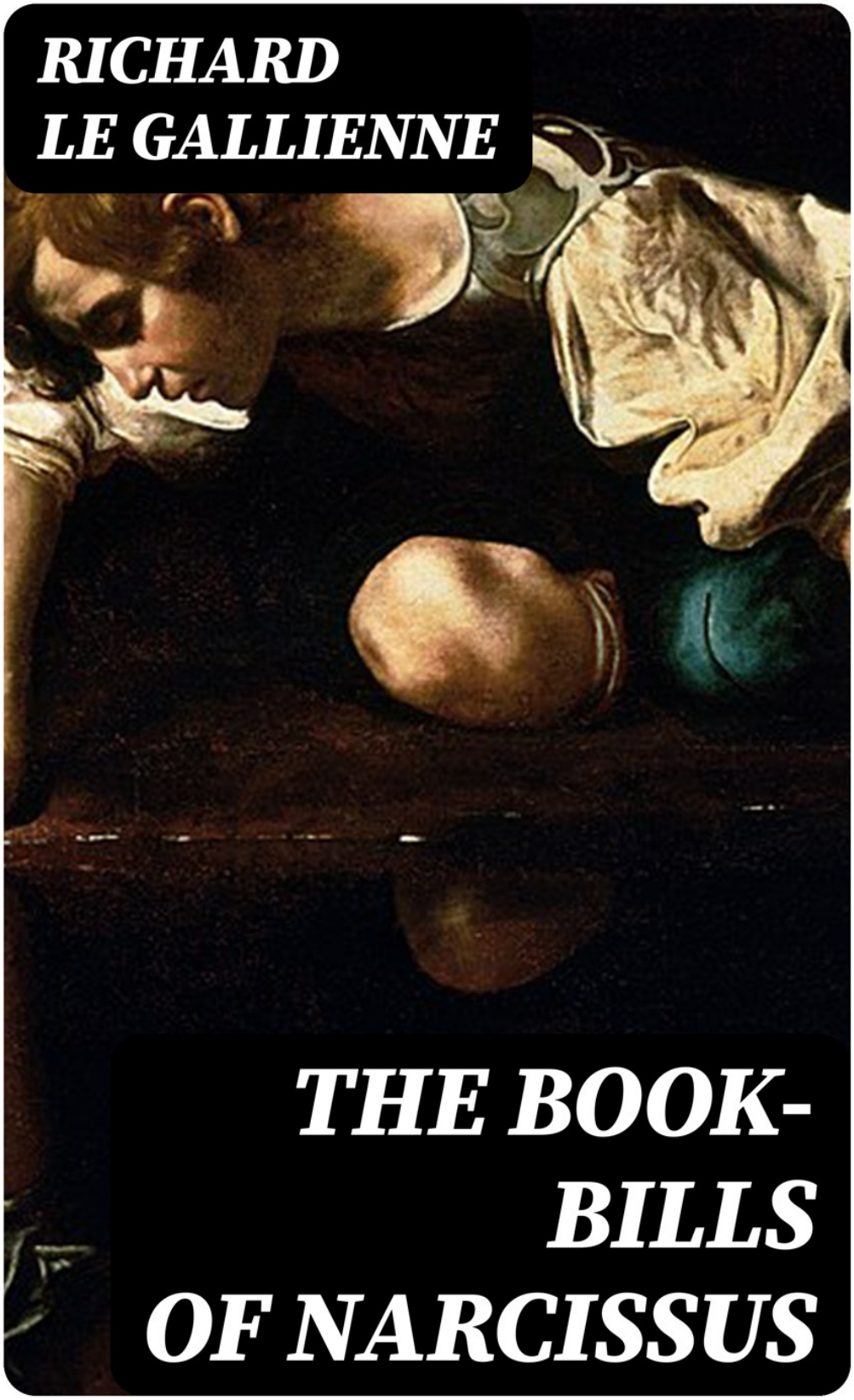
RICHARD LE GALLIENNE



THE BOOK-BILLS OF NARCISSUS


RICHARD
LE GALLIENNE
THE BOOK-
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OF NARCISSUS

Richard Le Gallienne

The Book-Bills of Narcissus

An Account Rendered by Richard Le Gallienne

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
CHAPTER X

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTORY—A WORD OF WISDOM, FOUND WRITTEN, LIKE THE MOST ANCIENT, ON LEATHER

'Ah! old men's boots don't go there, sir!' said the bootmaker to me one day, as he pointed to the toes of a pair I had just brought him for mending. It was a significant observation, I thought; and as I went on my way home, writing another such chronicle with every springing step, it filled me with much reflection—largely of the nature of platitude, I have little doubt: such reflection, Reader, as is even already, I doubt less, rippling the surface of your mind with ever-widening circles. Yes! you sigh with an air, it is in the unconscious autobiographies we are every moment writing—not those we publish in two volumes and a supplement—where the truth about us is hid. Truly it is a thought that has 'thrilled dead bosoms,' I agree, but why be afraid of it for that, Reader? Truth is not become a platitude only in our day. 'The Preacher' knew it for such some considerable time ago, and yet he did not fear to 'write and set in order many proverbs.'

You have kept a diary for how many years? Thirty? dear me! But have you kept your wine-bills? If you ever engage me to write that life, which, of course, must some day be written—I wouldn't write it myself—don't trouble about your diary. Lend me your private ledger. 'There the action lies in his true nature.'

Yet I should hardly, perhaps, have evoked this particular corollary from that man of leather's observation, if I had not

chanced one evening to come across those old book-bills of my friend Narcissus, about which I have undertaken to write here, and been struck—well-nigh awe-struck—by the wonderful manner in which there lay revealed in them the story of the years over which they ran. To a stranger, I am sure, they would be full of meaning; but to me, who lived so near him through so much of the time, how truly pregnant does each briefest entry seem.

To Messrs. Oldbuck and Sons they, alas! often came to be but so many accounts rendered; to you, being a philosopher, they would, as I have said, mean more; but to me they mean all that great sunrise, the youth of Narcissus.

Many modern poets, still young enough, are fond of telling us where their youth lies buried. That of Narcissus—would ye know—rests among these old accounts. Lo! I would perform an incantation. I throw these old leaves into the *elixir vitae* of sweet memory, as Dr. Heidegger that old rose into his wonderful crystal water. Have I power to make Narcissus' rose to bloom again, so that you may know something of the beauty it wore for us? I wonder. I would I had. I must try.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

STILL INTRODUCTORY, BUT THIS TIME OF A GREATER THAN THE WRITER

On the left-hand side of Tithefields, just as one turns out of Prince Street, in a certain well-known Lancashire town, is the unobtrusive bookshop of Mr. Samuel Dale. It must, however, be a very superficial glance which does not discover in it something characteristic, distinguishing it from other 'second-hand' shops of the same size and style.

There are, alas! treatises on farriery in the window; geographies, chemistries, and French grammars, on the trestles outside; for Samuel, albeit so great a philosopher as indeed to have founded quite a school, must nevertheless live. Those two cigars and that 'noggin' of whiskey, which he purchases with such a fine solemnity as he and I go home together for occasional symposia in his bachelor lodging—those, I say, come not without sale of such treatises, such geographies, chemistries, and French grammars.

But I am digressing. There is a distinguishing air, I but meant to say, about the little shop. Looking closer, one generally finds that it comes of a choice bit of old binding, or the quaint title-page of some tuneful Elizabethan. It was an old Crashaw that first drew me inside; and, though for some reason I did not buy it then, I bought it a year after, because to it I owed the friendship of Samuel Dale.

And thus for three bright years that little shop came to be, for a daily hour or so, a blessed palm-tree away from the burden and heat of the noon, a holy place whither the

money-changers and such as sold doves might never come, let their clamour in the outer courts ring never so loud. There in Samuel's talk did two weary-hearted bond-servants of Egypt draw a breath of the Infinite into their lives of the desk; there could they sit awhile by the eternal springs, and feel the beating of the central heart.

So it happened one afternoon, about five years ago, that I dropped in there according to wont. But Samuel was engaged with some one in that dim corner at the far end of the shop, where his desk and arm-chair, tripod of that new philosophy, stood: so I turned to a neighbouring shelf to fill the time. At first I did not notice his visitor; but as, in taking down this book and that, I had come nearer to the talkers, I was struck with something familiar in the voice of the stranger. It came upon me like an old song, and looking up—why, of course, it was Narcissus!

The letter N does not make one of the initials on the Gladstone bag which he had with him on that occasion, and which, filled with books, lay open on the floor close by; nor does it appear on any of those tobacco-pouches, cigar-cases, or handkerchiefs with which men beloved of fair women are familiar. And Narcissus might, moreover, truthfully say that *it* has never appeared upon any manner of stamped paper coming under a certain notable Act.

To be less indulgent to a vice from which the Reader will, I fear, have too frequent occasion to suffer in these pages, and for which he may have a stronger term than digression, let me at once say that Narcissus is but the name Love knew him by, Love and the Reader; for that name by which he was known to the postman—and others—is no necessity

here. How and why he came to be so named will appear soon enough.

Yes! it was the same old Narcissus, and he was wielding just the same old magic, I could see, as in our class-rooms and playgrounds five years before. What is it in him that made all men take him so on his own terms, made his talk hold one so, though it so often stumbled in the dark, and fell dumb on many a verbal *cul-de-sac*? Whatever it is, Samuel felt it, and, with that fine worshipful spirit of his—an attitude which always reminds me of the elders listening to the boy Jesus—was doing that homage for which no beauty or greatness ever appeals to him in vain. What an eye for soul has Samuel! How inevitably it pierces through all husks and excrescences to the central beauty! In that short talk he knew Narcissus through and through; three years or thirty years could add but little. But the talk was not ended yet; indeed, it seemed like so many of those Tithefields talks, as if in the 'eternal fitness of things' it never could, would, or should end. It was I at last who gave it pause, and—yes! indeed, it was he. We had, somehow, not met for quite three years, chums as we had been at school. He had left there for an office some time before I did, and, oddly enough, this was our first meeting since then. A purchaser for one of those aforesaid treatises on farriery just then coming in, dislodged us; so, bidding Samuel good-bye—he and Narcissus already arranging for 'a night'—we obeyed a mutual instinct, and presently found ourselves in the snuggery of a quaint tavern, which was often to figure hereafter in our sentimental history, though probably little in these particular chapters of it. The things 'seen done at "The

Mermaid "' may some day be written in another place, where the Reader will know from the beginning what to expect, and not feel that he has been induced to buy a volume under false pretences.

CHAPTER III

Table of Contents

IN WHICH NARCISSUS OPENS HIS 'GLADSTONE'

Though it was so long since we had met—is not three years indeed 'so long' in youth?—we had hardly to wait for our second glass to be again *en rapport*. Few men grow so rapidly as Narcissus did in those young days, but fewer still can look back on old enthusiasms and superannuated ideals with a tenderness so delicately considerate. Most men hasten to witness their present altitude by kicking away the old ladders on the first opportunity; like vulgar lovers, they seek to flatter to-day at the expense of yesterday. But Narcissus was of another fibre; he could as soon have insulted the memory of his first love.

So, before long, we had passed together into a sweet necropolis of dreams, whither, if the Reader care, I will soon take him by the hand. But just now I would have him concern himself with the afternoon of which I write, in that sad tense, the past present. Indeed, we did not ourselves tarry long among the shades, for we were young, and youth has little use for the preterite; its verbs are wont to have but two tenses. We soon came up to the surface in one, with eyes turned instinctively on the other.

Narcissus' bag seemed, somehow, a symbol; and I had caught sight of a binding or two as it lay open in Tithefields that made me curious to see it open again. He was only beginning to collect when we had parted at school, if 'collect' is not too sacred a word: beginning to *buy* more truly expresses that first glutting of the bookish hunger,