

# GREAT BOOKS.

## CHAPTER I.

### *GREAT BOOKS.*

I AM asked to write some papers on the subject of "Great Books" in general, to be followed by special papers on such supreme writers as Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, and Bunyan. That such studies may be useful to the young, who desire the guidance of experience, I may fairly hope; and if I can impress upon the minds of serious learners the truths which I shall urge upon their attention, I feel no doubt at all that there may be some to whom I may thus be enabled to render a lifelong service. For—

I. The multiplication of books in these days is almost beyond calculation. In any

mixed society of educated people it is the exception to find that there are no authors present. Of clergymen who have reached a certain age the majority have published something, if it be no more than a volume of sermons. The output of fiction is so astonishingly large that we cannot but wonder who are the readers of the numberless ephemeral volumes that appear and "perish like the summer fly." It is said that the subterranean rooms of a well-known circulating library are crammed with tens of thousands of volumes, chiefly novels, for which, even when they have had a temporary vogue, there is no longer any sale. It is the inevitable fate of the immense majority of writers that their publications fall more or less dead from the press, and very soon

"May bind a book, may line a box,  
May serve to curl a maiden's locks."

There are thousands of other books

which, though they are useful and profitable for a time, and accomplish their intended purpose, are then naturally superseded. For such literary productions their authors never expected more than a brief existence. Yet they have not been published to no purpose. They fall like the dead leaves of autumn; but just as the dead leaves have not lived in vain, since they serve to enrich the soil into which they perish, so the thoughts of myriads of men, though they possess no germ of immortality, do in their own limited degree furnish a contribution, however infinitesimal, to the intellectual life of each successive generation.

But if writers are thus abnormally numerous, what are we to say of *readers*? What is to be *their* guide in an age when "of making many books there is no end"? Do we not want a new Khalif Omar to make a vast conflagration of heaps of accumulated rubbish?

II. Among the ever-increasing multitude of books *many* are empty, commonplace, and platitudinous: others are positively dangerous and wicked books, though they, happily, are not numerous. And further than this, all books, as Mr. Ruskin says, may be classed as "books for the hour, or books for all time."

Now as the most general rules which I could give about reading, I should say to every young man or young woman, —

1. Make your deliberate choice, and do not attempt to read everything that comes in your way. It is not possible to know something about everything; it is rarely in our power to know everything about anything. But every one who aims at self-culture ought to have selected certain subjects about which he desires to be as well informed as his opportunities permit. Amid the vast accumulations of human knowledge there is not a single subject — not one period of history, not one sub-

dichotomy of any one science, not one department of archæology — which, if we desire to obtain a secure mastery of it, will not require the study of a lifetime. If any one wishes to be a student he must make up his mind not to attempt too much. He must set aside whole realms of knowledge as not coming within the personal range of his limited faculties and the short span of human existence.

2. Mere indiscriminate reading of any kind should be resolutely abjured. The hasty omnivorous swallowing of all kinds of intellectual pabulum will as certainly produce mental dyspepsia as thoughtless gluttony will ruin the physical digestion. Smatterings of unassimilated knowledge are responsible for that shallow conceit of opinionated infallibility which abounds in those schools where

"Blind and naked Ignorance  
Delivers brawling judgments, unashamed,  
On all things all day long."

In no other way can we account for the prolific and portentous phenomenon, which we daily witness, of nescience taking itself for knowledge, and insolently denouncing what it is utterly incompetent to understand. We might imagine that the writings of those who address the world from no higher standpoint than that of

"I am Sir Oracle,  
And when I ope my lips let no dog bark,"

could safely be left to perish of their own decay; nevertheless, the tone of confident assertion imposes on whole cliques and coteries of deluded adherents; and it is because they thus win credence that we so often see

"The meanest having power upon the highest,  
And the high purpose broken by the worm."

3. A minute's glance at many books is quite sufficient to show a practised reader whether they contain anything that will or

will not be of use to him. If he sees, for instance, that they are written, as is the case with whole legions of books, from the standpoint of a stereotyped bigotry and an arrogant incompetence, he may without a qualm of conscience toss them into the benevolent capaciousness of his nearest waste-paper basket. To read useless, meaningless, tenth-rate books, written by men who make little popes of their own unprogressive opinions, by men whose incapacity is a sea without a bottom and without a shore — to read *any* books which are written without a conscience or an aim, is an inexcusable manslaughter upon time. It bears the same relation to real reading as indolent loafing does to healthy and vigorous exercise. The old advice, "*Lege, lege, aliquid haerebit,*" is very bad advice if it be meant to include dabbling in all kinds of literature. It is, however, true that even in books which are in the main worthless there are sometimes "two grains

of wheat" hid in whole bushels of chaff. If we have the skill to secure these two wheat-grains in a few moments they may be useful to us. But there are not many readers who have gained the power of thus eviscerating books at a glance.

4. Newspapers are in these days necessary. The air of the whole world now thrills with common sympathies because the railroad and the telegraph bring the most distant regions into close contact; and there cannot be a mountain ascent in Alaska, or a volcanic eruption in Java, or a balloon sighted in the Polar Circle, without our hearing of it almost immediately. We cannot be indifferent to the history of the contemporary world; yet the amount of time deplorably wasted by numberless readers in idly devouring scraps of disconnected and vapid intelligence is quite inconceivable. Such reading must surely be meant only for those who are

"Too weak to bear  
The insupportable fatigue of thought,  
And swallow therefore, without pause or choice,  
The total grist, unsifted, husks and all."

Ordinarily speaking, a glance of ten minutes, or even five minutes, at our daily newspaper will tell us all that we ought to know. It is, for instance, worse than useless to read through the squalid details of every police trial, or the nauseous revelations of divorce courts, or vague political conjectures, or the sensational items of "the silly season." There are papers that seem to exist for no other purpose than "to chronicle small beer." There are other papers, as Lord Coleridge said, "made up of personalities so trivial, that, prior to experience, one would have supposed they could not possibly have interested, for a single moment, in the faintest possible degree, any human being." How can we have time to think, or leave a margin to our life, if we spend hours

every week in dabbling about in what Mr. Lowell called "the stagnant goose-ponds of village gossip"? Of what advantage can it be to know that yesterday "Mr. Brown's son swallowed a hickory nut" or "Mr. Jones's cart-wheel stuck in a mud rut"? How can we inhale healthy air if we are always living in the midst of what another American writer calls "the miasma which arises out of the shoreless lakes of human ditch-water"? "In a world of daily, nay, almost hourly, journalism," says Mr. Lowell again, "where every clever man, every man who thinks himself clever, or whom anybody else thinks clever, is called upon to deliver a judgment, point-blank and at the word of command, on every conceivable subject of human thought—or on what sometimes seems to him very much the same thing, on every inconceivable display of human *want* of thought—there is such a spendthrift waste of all those commonplaces which furnish the per-

mitted staple of public discourse, that there is little chance of beguiling a new tune out of the one-stringed instrument on which we have been thrumming so long." But when the "mems" and "items" and "pars" are full of gossip, scandal, and spite; when they are like the verminiferous dust in which are incubated the germs of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness—the less we notice them the better. They are undiluted poison to the healthy soul, which loves charity and truth.

5. There is one piece of advice which I would give with intense earnestness to all. It is this: Never be tempted by curiosity to read what you know to be a *bad* book, or what a very little reading *shows* you to be a bad book. Bad books—by which I do not mean merely ignorant and misleading books, but those which are prurient and corrupt—are the most fatal emissaries of the devil. They pollute with plague the moral atmosphere of the world.

Many and many a time a *good* book, read by a boy, has been the direct source of all his future success; has inspired him to attain and to deserve eminence; has sent him on the paths of discovery; has been as a sheet anchor to all that was noblest in his character; has contributed the predominant element to the usefulness and happiness of his whole life. Benjamin Franklin testified that a little tattered volume of "Essays to Do Good," by Cotton Mather, read when he was a boy, influenced the whole course of his conduct, and that if he had been a useful citizen "the public owes all the advantages of it to that little book." Jeremy Bentham said that the single phrase "the greatest good of the greatest number," caught at a glance in a pamphlet, directed the current of his thoughts and studies for life. The entire career of Charles Darwin was influenced by a book of travels which he read in early years. On the other hand,

it is fatally possible for any one—especially for any youth—to read himself to death in a bad book in five minutes. The well-known minister, John Angell James, narrated that, when he was at school, a boy lent him an impure book. He only read it for a few minutes; but even during those few minutes the poison flowed fatally into his soul, and became to him a source of bitterness and anguish for all his after years. The thoughts, images, and pictures thus glanced at haunted him all through life like foul spectres. Let no one indulge his evil curiosity under the notion that he is safe. "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool."

"Oh! who can hold a fire in his hand  
By thinking on the frosty Caucasus?"

Were we not warned two thousand years ago that "he who toucheth pitch shall be defiled"? and three millenniums ago the

question was asked, "Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? or can one walk upon hot coals, and his feet not be scorched?"

6. What makes every form of bad reading such a murder of time and so entirely inexcusable is that the world abounds not only in good books, but in entire *domains* of good books. Even the "great books" of the world furnish us with an inexhaustible supply. A lifetime would barely suffice to master all the good books which exist in any noble and fruitful branch of study. If we were not such bad economists of happiness we should make better use of the joy and beneficence opened to us by some of these developments of human faculty. Many a man whose life is now dreary, burdensome, and pernicious, might, had he been wiser, have been able to say,—

"My mind to me a kingdom is,  
Such perfect joy therein I find."

Many a sad and useless man might both have *been* good and *done* good,—might both have been as happy as human life permits and a source of happiness to others,—if he had learnt to take delight in the great thoughts of the wisest and holiest of mankind. There are boundless realms of beauty and of wonder and of power in the universe of God of which the intellect of the wise has learnt to decipher the meaning. There are priceless treasuries full of wealth "more golden than gold" which are open even to the humblest and poorest. To neglect them is not only unwise, but pusillanimous. These days especially need courage and gladness. The struggle for existence grows every day more keen, and is a struggle between nations no less than between individuals. Amid the vast growth of populations; amid the increasing difficulties of earning an honest subsistence; amid the reactions of lassitude caused by the wear and



tear, the strain and stress, of daily life ; amid the depression and uncertainty created by the deepening complexity of problems yet unsolved, — we need every possible counteraction of irresolution, weariness, and gloom. The influence of great books would enable us, more perhaps than any other influence, to acquire our own souls in confidence and peace. "He who is his own monarch," says Sir Thomas Browne, "contentedly sways the sceptre of himself, not envying the glory to crowned heads and the Elohim of the earth."

7. I might well speak of the immeasurable blessings to which any one of us might attain from even a partial knowledge of Science or of Art, of which the greatest results and the most eternal principles are set before us in many books. But I will confine my remarks to the subject of General Literature. If Science teaches us respecting Nature and her forces, and Art unfolds to us

"The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,  
Changes, surprises — and God made them all,"

Literature unfolds to us the deepest thoughts which can fill the great heart of humanity. We may, if we choose, find a purer and more exquisite delight in wise reading than in almost anything else. A few of the testimonies of eminent thinkers may help to bring this truth home to us. Cicero, the master of Roman eloquence, said that other studies are for one time, or one place, or one mood; but these studies are with us at home and abroad, in town or in the country, by day and by night, in youth and in old age; our consolation in days of sorrow, our exhilaration in hours of peace. Petrarch, when his friend the bishop, thinking that he was overworked, took away the key of his library, was restless and miserable the first day, had a bad headache the second, and was so ill by the third day that the bishop

in alarm returned the key, and let his friend read as much as he liked. "A good book," says Milton in his famous "Areopagitica," "is the precious lifeblood of a master-spirit, treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life." The historian Gibbon said that he would not exchange the love of reading for the Empire of India. "Books," says Cowper, —

"Are not seldom talismans and spells."

Wordsworth, after saying that

"Books, we know,  
Are a substantial world, both pure and good,  
Round these, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,  
Our pastime and our happiness will grow,"

adds,

"Nor can I not believe but that hereby  
Great gains are mine ; for thus I live remote  
From evil-speaking ; rancour, never sought,  
Comes to me not ; malignant truth or lie.  
Hence have I genial seasons, hence have I  
Smooth passions, smooth discourse, and joyous  
thought,

And thus from day to day my little boat  
Rocks in its harbour, lodging peacefully."

And certainly among the poems of Southey which will live we should place the charming lines:—

"My days among the dead are past ;  
Around me I behold,  
Where'er these casual eyes are cast,  
The mighty minds of old.  
My never-falling friends are they  
With whom I converse day by day ;

With them I take delight in weal,  
And seek relief in woe :  
And while I understand and feel  
How much to them I owe,  
My cheeks have often been bedew'd  
With tears of thoughtful gratitude."

8. To these testimonies of great poets I will add three remarkable passages from prose writers. My object is to impress on my readers, and especially on the young, a sense of the joy and safety which they may gain from the study of great books, and I therefore wish to quote to them the weightiest authorities.

1. Here, then, is a singularly bright and

beautiful passage from a mediæval writer, Gilbert Porretanus or de la Porrée.<sup>1</sup> He was once left alone in his monastery while all his brethren had gone for change of air to the seaside, and he wrote in one of his letters:—

“Our house is empty, save only myself and the rats and mice, who nibble in solitary hunger. There is no voice in the hall, no tread on the stairs. The clock has stopped . . . the pump creaks no more. But I sit here with no company but books, dipping into dainty honeycombs of literature. All minds in the world’s history find their focus in a library. This is the pinnacle of the temple from which we may see all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. I keep Egypt and the Holy Land in the closet next the window. On one side of them is Athens and the Empire of Rome. Never was such an army mustered as I have here. No general ever had such soldiers as I have. No kingdom ever had half

<sup>1</sup> There were two writers of this name—one in the twelfth and one in the sixteenth century. I have not yet been able to verify the passage. It is quoted in Alexander Ireland’s “Booklovers’ Enchiridion.”

such illustrious subjects as mine, or half as well governed. I can put my haughtiest subjects up or down as it pleases me. . . . I call ‘Plato,’ and he answers ‘Here’—a noble and sturdy soldier. ‘Aristotle,’ ‘Here’—a host in himself. ‘Demosthenes,’ ‘Cicero,’ ‘Cæsar,’ ‘Tacitus,’ ‘Pliny,’ ‘Here!’ they answer, and they smile at me in their immortality of youth. Modest all, they never speak unless spoken to. Bountiful all, they never refuse to answer. And they are all at peace together. My architects are building night and day without sound of hammer; my painters designing, my poets singing, my philosophers discoursing, my historians and theologians weaving their tapestries, my generals marching about without noise or blood. I hold all Egypt in fee simple. I build not a city but empires at a word. I can say as much of all the Orient as he who was sent to grass did of Babylon. . . . All the world is around me; all that ever stirred human hearts or fired the imagination is harmlessly here. My library shelves are the avenues of time. Ages have wrought, generations grown, and all their blossoms are cast down here. It is the garden of immortal fruits, without dog or dragon.”

“II. All readers will, I think, thank me for that bright passage from an old scho-

lastic theologian nearly nine centuries ago. My next quotation shall be from Mr. Ruskin:—

“All the higher circles of human intelligence,” he says in “Sesame and Lilies,” “are, to those beneath, only momentarily and partially open. We may, by good fortune, obtain a glimpse of a great poet, and hear the sound of his voice, or put a question to a man of science and be answered good-humoredly. We may intrude ten minutes’ talk on a cabinet minister . . . or snatch, once or twice in our lives, the privilege of arresting the kind glance of a queen. And yet these momentary chances we covet . . . while, meantime, there is a society open to us of people who will talk to us as long as we like, whatever our rank or occupation. And this society, because it is so numerous and so gentle . . . kings and statesmen lingering patiently in the plainly furnished and narrow anterooms, our bookcase shelves — we make no account of that company — perhaps never listen to a word they would say, all day long!”

III. And here is one more eloquent passage from Æneas Sage:—

“I go into my library, and, like some great panorama, all history unrolls itself before me. I breathe the morning air of the world while the scent of Eden’s roses yet lingers in it. . . . I see the Pyramids building. I hear Memnon murmur as the first morning sunbeam touches him. . . . I sit as in a theatre: the stage is Time, the play is the play of the World. What a spectacle it is! what kingly pomp! what processions pass by! what cities burn to heaven! what crowds of captives are dragged at the heels of conquerors! In my solitude I am only myself at intervals. The silence of the unpeopled Syrian plains, the incomings and outgoings of the Patriarchs, Abraham and Ishmael, Isaac in the fields at eventide, Rebekah at the well, Jacob’s guile, Esau’s face reddened by desert suns, Joseph’s splendid funeral procession,— all these things I can find within the boards of my Old Testament. . . . Books are the true Elysian Fields where the spirits of the dead converse, couched on flowers; and to these fields a mortal may venture unappalled. What king’s court can boast such company? what school of philosophy such wisdom? . . . No man sees more company than I do. I travel with mightier cohorts around me than did Tamerlane and Zenghis Khan in their fiery marches. I am a sovereign in my library; but it is the dead, not the living, that attend my *levée*.”