

Thesis

by

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"Books That Help and Books That Hinder."

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"In one sense," says Andrew Lang, "there are no books that do not help a man, and in another, it may be doubted whether any books help him at all." He goes on to say that every book that can be read will please, amuse, interest, divert, or at least occupy the time, and in that sense is helpful; but he does not think any book (excepting the sacred literature) can be of any help in the great problems of life, except by way of sympathy. Marcus Aurelius himself, he declares, can say no more than to "endure and abstain". Books cannot give us courage, strength of character, and patience endure; they cannot make us grieve the less or rejoice the more, except by the comforting quality, sympathy, or the force of example.

But can anything except God himself give us more than this? Our joys, our griefs, are for us alone to experience; in ourselves alone must be the strength and power; with the sympathy of friends to sustain, with the example of others to point out the way, and with God's help, to fight to fight the battles of life and conquer, or else life must be a failure so far as we are concerned.

the bad or There are books and books; and the bad ones, alas are much more numerous than the good. There are many more which are what

Emerson calls "neutral", and do nothing for us. I think it is Robert Collyer who said, "There are books beyond numbering which authors and publishers should advertise as I noticed a man in Denver advertised his soda fountain, as 'sweetened wind'."

But there are good books, accessible to every body, and quite as essential to ones higher life as are food and clothing to his physical nature, or friends to his social nature and, in the truest sense of the word, they are friends. Goldsmith says, "The first time I read a good book it is as if I gained a friend". Emerson, that wise, deep thinker, says, "There are books which are of that importance in a man's private experience, as to verify for him the fables of Cornelius Agrippa, of Michael Scott, or of the Old Orpheus of Thrace, — books which take rank in our lives with parents and lovers and passionate experiences, so authoritative, — books which are the work and the proof of so comprehensive, so nearly equal to the world which they paint, that, though one shuts them with meaner ones, he feels this exclusion from them to accuse his way of living." His advice is, never read a book not a year old, never read any but famed authors, and never read any but what you like.

With children we notice how much

stronger an impression of wrong doing and idleness,
 of perseverance and endeavor is made on their
 minds by means of the story. Who can estimate the
 good done by "Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales," "Mother Goose's
 Rhymes," and "Aesop's Fables"? How much quicker the truths
 are grasped, and I think in most cases the lessons
 they teach are longer remembered, in this way, are
 the foundations for many strong moral characters
 laid. As the child grows older, he tires of Mother
 Goose, but will find an interesting and helpful
 study in "What Katy Did," "What Katy Did at School," and
 "What Katy Did next"; and in fighting Tom Brown's battles.
 Miss Alcott also steps forward with her wise council
 so charmingly given, and Mrs. Whitney gives us much
 good advice. Do we not all feel stronger and better for
 having wandered with "Julia Reed" through many
 mistakes and mistaken ideas to a more true insight
 of the strong Christian character? Then comes Dickens, with
 his quaint humor and his truthful exaggerations. How
 we loathe and despise the cruel wickedness of Squeers,
 the more intelligent but no less sinful cruelty of
 Ralph Nickleby, the treacherous scheming of Uriah
 H , and the perfidious hypocrisy of ! We
 cannot but suffer with their victims, and fight
 their battles with them; and thus the lesson
 becomes real to us. "When I am reading a book," says

Dear Swift "it seems to be alive and talking to me; and I am sure there is no one who enjoys reading Dickens who does not feel an ambition to build his character nobly, and unselfishly use his powers in making society better.

But a book may be the means of warping one's character, distorting his views, and giving him false ideas of life and its great truths. Agnes Repplier says, "Even Emerson's essay on 'Compensation' has failed to restore to me the full meaning of all that I lost through the 'Heir of Redclyffe'." This destroyed the doctrine that virtue is its own reward for me. That in the end all will be right for those who do right. She also sights 'Laurford and Merton' as giving her a false impression of life, although there was apparently no harm in the book. "But for the first time," she declares, "my soul revolted from the pretentious virtues of honest poverty. It is to the malign influence of that tale that I owe my sneaking preference for the drones and butterflies of earth. I cannot even sympathize with the noble theory that every man and woman should do their share of the world's work. I would shirk my own if I could. Then some books really good in themselves may at times be a hindrance. For instance, books beyond one or books distasteful to one; and if forced upon a person, they miss all the good, and instead get much harm. Imagine the harm that may be done by forcing a student

just entering their teens to read Bacon, Milton, or even Shakespeare. Shakespeare says,

"No profit goes where is no pleasure taken
In brief, sir, study what you must effect."

But the mission of books is not confined to ministering to our moral and social nature, but has also a much wider field of labor. A few books there are which if utilized to their utmost capacity would furnish a most thorough education in themselves. Such as the works of the early Greek writers, or the more modern Bacon and Shakespeare. It has been said of Shakespeare that the best proof of his vitality is the crowd of writers which suddenly broke into that field; and of Chaucer, that one is charmed with the opulence which feeds so many pensioners. Their power lies in the fact that they understood human nature so well, and possessed in such great degree the faculty of telling others what they saw. "But of an infinite heap of things around us in the world, they chose a certain number which they grasped thoroughly, and presented them to us in the form best calculated to enable us to grasp it also, and to grasp it with delight."

Jerome, while musing by his fireside, solves some of the greatest problems of life. In Grays "Elegy" every word is freighted with meaning, and so well chosen that no other word could express the

thought so well. It is said Gray was seven years in writing this little poem. He pondered for more than three months for one word and finally the word flashed on his mind so suddenly it took him some time to recover from the shock. This was the word plods. Emerson gives us some of the most profound truths in essays only a few pages in length, Ruskin takes us with him in his travels, and through his eyes we see the sublime beauty of his loved mountains, its flowers, its streams and their falls, and even grass is endowed with the grandest of beauty when looked at with this great artist's insight.

There is still a higher scope of work for books, and that is their effect on our ideal natures; and I think Longfellow found the golden key which unlocks the door to the ideal world and gives us a glimpse of what highest endeavor may obtain. How we love him for the sympathy he expresses and the encouragement he gives us. How ennobling his "Psalm of Life" and his "Bridge"! Lowell's "Vision of Sir Launfal" should also be a vision for us. Spenser, in the most beautiful of language, pictures the strife on earth between good and evil, showing the beauty of goodness and its final triumph. Bunyan though only a poor ignorant pauper has been able to give us one of the grandest works on the Christian life, ever

written in the English language; and so straight-forward that a child can understand it.

Browning in a little poem on death shows such willingness to fight life's battles in order to gain life's reward, that one cannot but feel the grandeur of such a character. Milton, that grand, sublime, mysterious, poet by his wonderful power, has been able to show us the awful horrors of Hades, the splendor of Heaven, and the loveliness of Paradise with a vividness which some one has termed superhuman, and rivaling memory itself. Last, and far more precious than all the rest, comes the Bible, whose divine power and influence is so well known and felt that it would be useless and beyond my power to attempt to tell of it.

In conclusion then, let me quote the advice of Emerson, found in the following paragraph.

"Be sure, then, to read no mean books. Shun the spawn of the press or the gossip of the hour. Do not read what you shall learn, without asking, in the street and the train. Mr. Johnson said he always went into stately shops; and good travellers stop at the best hotels; for, though they cost more, they do not cost much more, and there is the good company and the best information. In like manner, the scholar knows that the famed

books contain, first and last, the best thoughts and facts. Now and then, by rarest luck, in some foolish Barb Street is the gem we want. But in the best circles is the best information. If you should transfer the amount of your reading day by day from the newspapers to the standard authors — But who dare speak of such a thing?"