

## PREFACE.

“Their only labour, how to kill the time,  
“And labour dire it is, and weary woe!”

“IF such be the misery attached to indolence,” said I, placing the poem on its shelf, and drawing out my concealed manuscript, “I may at least plead in defence of novel-writing a benevolent principle, which in its exertions serves at least to ameliorate the unhappy condition of people of this description; and although I may have to encounter those who are governed by prudential motives, and a rigid circumspection in the acrimony they display against novel-writers and novel-readers, some may have the candour to pronounce that time not unprofitably bestowed which has saved me from feeling it an insupportable burthen, and themselves from ‘the labour how to kill the time.’”

I was interrupted in my meditation by the bell at my gate announcing a visitor: it was my accustomed guest, who, entering, drew his chair to the fire, complained of the easterly wind, and, taking off his spatterdashes, asked me what I had ordered for dinner. I satisfied his curiosity, adding, that there was yet time for his favourite pudding; and I promised to treat him with it upon condition that he would help me out with a handsome argument in favour of novel-writing. He gave a nod of assent; and I, spreading the sheet of paper before him, withdrew. Willing to allow him full time, I did not join him till the dinner hour, when I found him reading the newspaper, and my preface in the same state in which I had left it. “How is this?” said I, somewhat disappointed: “could you find nothing to say in favour of a novel?” “No,” replied he, “you had said all that can be said in their favour.”—“I am of a very different opinion,” answered I, taking up my knitting work with a serious air: “you might, if you had been in the humour, have found many arguments in recommendation of a *good novel*.”—“There is a solecism even in the term you employ,” cried he, rising: “there are none *good*; for those which are merely *harmless* can have no claim to that title, and those which are *dangerous* are positively bad. Of this I will soon convince you.”—“Let us have our dinner,” cried I pettishly; “for, when once you mount your pony, there is no knowing the length of your journey.” He laughed, but was silenced. The cloth was no sooner removed than he renewed the subject, by asking me whether I really wished to know his opinion of novels. “It will be amusing,” replied I, smiling; “for it will, I doubt not, be like most you support, influenced by the wind that blows: but let us hear what you have to say by way of illustration to what you have advanced against good novels.”—“Willingly,” answered he, collecting himself into seriousness.

“In the first place, we will consider the baneful effects of the *very best* models of this species of composition, as they strike on the vivid fancy of youth. Is it not undeniable that they are expressly calculated, by the extraordinary events with which they abound, to excite in a powerful degree the curiosity of the reader, who, beguiled by a semblance to truth, acquires the habit of viewing the real scenes of life through a false medium, and gradually loses the relish for the unadorned pages of sober truth?... You are silent, my good friend: we will proceed. Is it not as indisputable, that a young and inexperienced

creature must, when thus diverted from the simple deductions of common sense and daily observation, be in danger of deviating into the paths of delusion and error? Let us trace one of these pupils of Romance. Prepared by an imagination which, it is more than probable, needed no auxiliary to adopt the sentiments to which, it may be, she was a stranger, the young adventurer goes forth into this world's warfare with a fastidious sensibility which precludes content. She rejects all that is common in the allotment of human happiness, as too vulgar for her refined ideas; and views with contempt, and even abhorrence, all the imperfections to which human nature is, in some way or other, exposed; whilst, blinded by her own imaginary perfections, she becomes the dupe of the first man who finds it for his interest or his amusement to flatter her vanity by an affectation of her folly. Is the evil lessened, think you, because with a childish avidity, rather than from a judicious discrimination, she has drawn her principles of conduct from works of genius and taste? Is the deadly nightshade less baneful because it is alluring to the eye, and grows amidst the choicest productions of nature? No, my good friend; and, whether the sensibility of a girl is awakened by a Julia de Mandeville; or whether she thrills with horror in the Forest of Fontainville; whether the cup of enchantment is offered in the Simple Story; or whether, with a mind as pure, she gives to an *Evelina* tears of sympathy and exultation, it lessens not her own danger. The reins are in the hands of Fancy, and sober Reason is dismissed. Enthusiasm and the prompt affections of the heart are gratified; and the chequered path of life has only one road to happiness and greatness—that of a *virtue*, which, however opposed, is always *triumphant*, and commonly ends with a title and a large fortune. Alas! how different is the story of human life! in which man is taught by experience, as well as by his reason and the revealed purpose of his Maker, to expect no recompense here for the services he pays to virtue, beyond the peace of his own mind, and the hopes of a future existence in which he will receive the reward of well doing.

“Can you imagine, my dear Mrs. Sedley,” continued my friend, “that the imagination of youth needs these incitements to activity?”—I rose, and stirred the fire.—“Do you think that you would act wisely in ordering more fuel to that blaze, and increasing the heat which your physician would at this moment tell you was more than sufficient for the purposes of health? Thus it is with the very best works of fancy: they tend to debilitate our natural vigour, and, by their enervating effects, to render us like sensitive plants, which shrink from the slightest touch, and wither when exposed to a healthy temperature of air.

“How many examples could be produced of girls sickening over the unembellished duties of their station, pining amidst comforts, and disgusted with the security of humble life! How many, impatient of the parental yoke, have forsaken the abode of innocence and safety for a man whom, peradventure, they may have danced with twice or thrice, and met as often on a public walk! But without appealing to such instances of youthful indiscretion, which you may, perhaps, without greatly erring, ascribe to very different motives, I will follow one of your sublimed heroines a little further in her course. Prepared by chimerical hopes, and *refined*, as it is termed, to a susceptibility which makes no allowances for the foibles of poor erring man, the delicate visionary

becomes a wife, it may be a mother, and under these characters her fate is determined and her duties are marked out. But can she, who expected the perfections of an angel, be prepared to meet the contradictions and weaknesses of a mere mortal? Will her dreams of everlasting constancy and unceasing admiration be realized? Will even the honest and fair portion of kindness, protection, and duty, which she may receive, satisfy the cravings of a mind thus raised beyond reasonable views? Disgust and discontent succeed to disappointment. The husband, whose foibles a sound judgment would have overlooked, or at least have balanced with some good quality, is styled in the language of despair ‘*a Sir John Brute*;

and it is ten to one but in the end the fair mourner finds that she does not misapply the epithet. As a mother she stands no better chance: for, a stranger to the plain rules of moral conduct and moral discipline on the one hand, and unprovided with firmness and patience on the other, she is perpetually fluctuating in her plans for her children’s benefit; and, as they exhibit talents or defects, she worships them as *idols*, or neglects them as incorrigible. It always excites my compassion,” continued my friend, “when I meet with a being of this description. She appears to me to have no affinity with this world, nor a resting-place in it. Too refined, and, I will add what candour dictates, too pure, and too virtuous, for degrading pursuits; too impassioned for common blessings; too cultivated for your ‘Castle of Indolence,’ and too delicate for usefulness; she passes her pilgrimage in pursuit of a shadow, which cheats her of the gratifications of sense, and checks her in her progress to more noble and satisfying attainments.

“You may have observed that I have confined myself in these remarks to what you call *good* novels, and which I rank with the first productions of human genius, notwithstanding my seeming severity of judgment. They are medicines, but they are not usefully applied. It is not in youth that we meet with the asperities of a sordid and selfish mind, or the cold-hearted apathy of worldly pride: for these they are antidotes, or at least emollients, which most constitutions of mind at *forty* may safely use without danger to prudence or hazard to their principles.

“But what shall be said for some modern publications circulating amongst us, in which genius is debased with the jargon of metaphysical pride and subtilty, for the purpose, as it seems, of poisoning the vital springs of life; in which crimes which ought to appal the human heart are softened down as constitutional weaknesses, and balanced by brilliant talents and splendid virtues; in which the religion and the laws of the country are sifted by an inquiry at once insolent, virulent, and sophistical; and the unguarded victim of an idle curiosity is taught to believe the former a fable, and the latter chains forged by tyrants, and an usurpation on his rights as a man? Is it by removing every barrier against the encroachments of passion, that a youth is to become master of himself? Is it by rendering vice less hideous that he will the more firmly resist her solicitations? Or, misled by his own vanity, will he easily discover that the argument which seduces the *boy* would be refuted by the *man* with cool contempt and reasonable logic? It is, however, to be lamented that, wise as the admirers of such publications as these may be in their own conceits, they should so rarely discover in time, that it must be by more substantial food than that which any novel can supply that they will be made men or philosophers; for, when they do stumble upon this conviction, they will view with scorn the fallacy as well

as danger of those doctrines which in the hour of heedless youth and eager curiosity have beguiled them of their time, and confounded their simplicity.”

“You have gone much further into this subject,” answered I, “than I think necessary for my purpose; and although I admit the truth of your arguments as these justly reprobate dangerous novels, yet I cannot help thinking your objections to a good novel rest solely on the weakness of the reader, who, deficient in more solid attainments, would be at the mercy of every accident, whether she read novels or shunned them. I firmly believe a good novel is entitled to the gratitude of many for the little knowledge they have. No one who, reflecting on human nature, looks out for a remedy for indolence, will deny that a good novel may furnish employment for the mind, which, deprived of this aliment of easy digestion, would have recourse to something worse; and in a country like this, where, by the influx of opulence and ease, there are probably more idle people than in any other, novels are of some use. But I will go further in my defence of a good work of this kind, and assert, that in the blooming region of fancy, and in the paths of genius, there may be found secure spots in which innocence may sport, and in which the traveller, weary of the dull road of life, may rest a while without forgetting the purpose of his journey. Thus I think I have proved to you that the writer of a good novel has at least a claim to the good will of society, as the contriver of an agreeable amusement, and the enlivener of a vacant hour: for you will allow, that whatever contributes to the sum of human enjoyments, without being too chargeable to human prudence, is so much gained. But I think that even more may be said in favour of works of this sort,” continued I with increasing ardour. “In all ages of literary knowledge and human improvement, it has been the study to allure curiosity to the school of morality by means of fiction. Instruction cannot assume a more pleasing form than when attired by the hands of a chaste and correct fancy; nor will that lesson be useless which shows Vice smarting with self-inflicted wounds; Folly blushing beneath the keen eye of Ridicule; and Virtue, although impeded by trials and opposed in her progress, steadily pursuing her road and reaching the recompense annexed to well-doing. Surely a species of composition which has for its aim so benevolent an end, cannot, if it be properly conducted, deserve your condemnation. I have seen disobedient daughters who had not been novel-readers, and discontented and weak women amongst those who regard them as *sinful books*, and as carrying along with them a contagion never to be evaded but by shunning even those suspected of indulging in the perusal of them. To a mind without strength there is nothing which may not be hurtful; and he who believes that his wife or his daughter will be perverted by an acquaintance with the works of those women in particular whose lives are the best commentaries on their books, must have a shallow judgment, and a better claim to my respect than any which arises from his contempt of a *good novel*.”

“I should not be displeased to see a novel from your hand,” observed my friend with a smile; “for, with all your faults and imperfections on your head, you want not experience; and you seem to have considered the subject very maturely. If you will engage to try your abilities, I will bring you to-morrow an excellent recipe for your government, by adhering to which you will confirm me in your opinions.”— “I thank you,” replied I with an air he understood: “I have written one without any recipe but that

which an honest and simple understanding afforded me; and although I believe it would neither corrupt nor mislead any girl, I shall take care it add not to the national sin.”—“Why, is it possible that you have dared to keep from me a secret of this kind?” cried he, with assumed wrath. “Let me see it this very moment.”—“No,” replied I, laughing, “you have too much alarmed my conscience; you are yet too young for novel-reading; and I am no longer at a loss to account for your eccentricities, knowing, as I do, that you have not slept these fifty years without an anodyne prepared from the circulating library.”—“It is false,” cried he: “I am not yet sixty years old, and for the first thirty years of my life I was engaged myself in a work entitled ‘Confidence betrayed, or The Romance of Major Oldcastle.’”—His features swelled, and he was silent for some minutes. I was softened; and, placing my manuscript before him, diverted the gloom which I well knew would succeed to his recollection of his injuries. No entreaties could detain him for the evening. He left me; and I passed away the solitary hours in writing down the conversation of the day; not exactly knowing whether it might not be more properly reserved as *a concluding* chapter, than placed before my work as a preface.

In a few days my manuscript was returned, and to it was affixed the following extract from “Les Lettres Juives.” It is left to the reader’s judgment to decide how far the writer of the subsequent pages understands the true meaning of, or has profited by, the instruction contained in the selected passage.

“Autrefois les Romans n’étaient qu’un ramas d’aventures tragiques, qui enlevaient l’imagination, et déchiraient le cœur. On les lisait avec plaisir, mais on ne retirait d’autre profit de leur lecture que de se nourrir l’esprit de chimères qui souvent devenaient nuisibles.

“Les jeunes gens avalaient à longs traits les idées vagues et gigantesques de ces héros inventés: et les génies habitués à des imaginations outrées ne goûtaient plus le vraisemblable.

“Depuis quelque tems on a changé cette façon de penser. Le goût est revenu; au lieu du surnaturel on veut du raisonnable; et à la place d’un nombre d’incidens qui chargeaient les moindres faits, on demande une narration simple, vive, et soutenue par des portraits qui nous présentent l’agréable et l’utile.”

