

CHAPTER VIII—NOVELS AND NOVEL-READING.

"Of making many books there is no end." Eccl. xii, 12.

[N]ovel-reading has become one of the great vices of our age. Multitudes care for nothing but light reading. The bookstores abound with works of fiction. The records of our public libraries show that there are more readers in this department than any other--perhaps more than in all the rest. The literature which finds its way into the hands of our people, as they journey by land or water, is almost invariably fictitious. Our weekly periodicals, secular and religious, often have their serial story... A whole generation of young people are growing up, to whom solid books are unknown, to whom the great historic names of the past are but a sound, and whose ignorance of the world of fact is poorly compensated by their acquaintance with the world of dreams... Let our young people be constantly on their guard against the mental enslavement which marks the confirmed novel-reader. Common novel-reading is a fearful evil, and against it there are arguments numerous and weighty, which all will do well to heed.

1. *It wastes precious time.*

By universal consent, works of fiction are called "light literature"... They aim chiefly to amuse the reader, not instruct, nor convince, nor raise him to the height of a great purpose; and, in general, the best that can be said of the best of them is, that they confer pleasure without inflicting injury... The vast majority of novel readers are young, and for them to squander the precious hours is suicidal...

2. *Excessive light reading injures the mind.*

The novelist seeks to bear his readers along without any labor on their part. They simply witness the action, and watch the unfolding of the plot. The author amuses them with wit and humor; and, if he can, melts them with pathos, or charms them with eloquent description... The novel-reader that does little or nothing but lounge about with a weak dilution of literature in hand, will soon become as soft and flabby in mind as in muscle, wholly incapable of lofty purposes and worthy deeds.

3. *Excessive light reading tends to unfit for real life.*

[The] Cinderella of the old nursery story is the true type of thousands of our novel-readers. They live a sort of double life--one in their own proper persons, and in their real homes; the other as ideal lords and ladies in dream-land. Ella, sitting among her native cinders, is a very prosaic individual, addicted to exceedingly prosaic employments, and fulfilling a destiny far removed from sublimated romance. But touched by the wand of the good Fairy, Ella is transfigured, her coarse garments are robes of magnificence, the mice are prancing steeds, the pumpkin is a coach, and she rides in state, the admiration of all beholders, and weds the prince triumphantly.

The modern Ella, sitting among the cinders, has indeed no good Fairy to confer sudden splendors upon her; but her place is well supplied by sundry periodicals, designed for just this style of readers. And so Ella invests her six cents weekly, and reads, and dreams. According to the flesh, she bears an honest, humble name, busies herself with a cooking stove, or a noisy sewing-machine, and with all her matrimonial anglings, perhaps has never a nibble. In her other capacity she is the Countess of Moonshine, who dwells in a Castle of Spain, wears a coronet of diamonds, and to whom ardent lords and smitten princes make love in loftiest eloquence; and she is blest. But, as Napoleon once observed, there is only a step between the sublime and the ridiculous. At any moment the coach of state may relapse into its original squash, the prancing horses again become mice, the costly array turn once more to rags; and the Countess... subside into her former simple self, with the hideous onions to be peeled, or the clattering machine to be kept in motion...

How is it possible for those whose minds are thus bewildered, and who have formed this inveterate habit of indulging in sentimental reverie, to engage heartily in the performance of commonplace duties? The inevitable result of excessive novel-reading is a distaste, if not an incapacity, for the sober thought and patient effort which are the price of success in every worthy path of life.