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READING.

A SERMON. BY E. H. SEARS.

“Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness to the flesh. Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.” ECCLESIASTES xii. 12, 13.

THERE is a story of an Eastern monarch whose purport is very much like the advice of Solomon, and seems like another edition of it. The monarch had a library which contained books enough to load a thousand camels. “I can’t read all that,” he said to his librarian; “just reduce it down and let me have the substance and essence of it.” So the librarian reduced it down and put it into a number of volumes which would make only thirty camel loads. “I have not time, nor strength, nor eye-sight to read thirty camel loads of books; reduce it still more.” So the librarian distilled it again and put it into a number of books sufficient to load only a single ass. “Too bulky yet,” said the monarch. “Reduce it more.” Whereupon the librarian treble distilled it and reduced the whole to these three sentences written on a palm-leaf:—

“This is the sum of all science—Perhaps.

“This is the sum of all morality—Love what is good and practice it.

“This is the sum of all creeds—Believe what is true.”

Solomon, the reputed author of the book of Ecclesiastes, had literary resources, it would seem, not less ample than those of the Kaliph of Bagdad just quoted. Solomon was himself a great writer of books and a great reader. He composed or collected three thousand proverbs and one thousand and five oriental songs. He studied botany, natural history, astrology and necromancy, the ancient spiritualism, so that there was a concourse of strangers from all countries to hear his wisdom. Arabian legends even to this day preserve traditions about him which harmonize with those of the Hebrew scriptures. They describe him as:—

“The kingly sage, whose restless mind
Through Nature’s mazes wandered, unconfined,

Who every bird and beast and insect knew,
And spake of every plant that quaffs the dew.
To him were known, so Hagar's offspring tell,
The powerful sigil and the starry spell,
The midnight call, hell's shadowy legions dread,
And sounds that burst the slumbers of the dead."

And yet, a great deal of this supposed knowledge, indeed all he had gathered about the starry spell and the state of the dead, would probably be reduced in the last analysis to—perhaps. And his three thousand proverbs and one thousand and five canticles he distils down into this sentence: "Fear God and keep his commandments." How true is one of his proverbs still preserved to us, "There is nothing new under the sun." And the gathered wisdom of one age applies to the practice of all ages. It still remains true that of making books there is no end, and if we are to read them all, it would not only be a weariness to the flesh, but a whelming flood of nonsense upon the brain. Making books has become the art of inflating the currency of mind and thought, not merely pouring knowledge from one reservoir into another, but diluting it till only a pale tinge of it is discernible. New discoveries in science are heralded forth, specially in geology and anthropology, which are going to supersede Revelation. We buy up the books and read them through, and so far as religion stands affected we reduce the new science in them to a "perhaps," or at most to such a compass that you could write it out on a palm-leaf. We say this without denying at all the progress of discovery in physical science and mechanical arts and all that goes to affect our physical comfort and well-being in this world, and our knowledge of human nature so far forth as it has gone into history and been crystallized there. But for all the purposes of individual improvement, edification and substantial knowledge, we must adopt the same process now that the Kaliph adopted and that Solomon recommended. Instead of casting ourselves at random on this ocean of a watery literature, we must select, distil and concentrate if we mean to read to any purpose or any wise and beneficent end. And now in unfolding the subject let us endeavor to see, how reading books may be made, not a weariness and a means of deterioration, but a means of moral health, progress and enlightenment.

I. And the first condition is to read with a moral purpose and aim. That done, all the rest will follow in its natural order. The moral law applies to reading as to anything else. Reading, like business, has a twofold province. One is work and the other is play. One requires thinking, the other is relaxation from all thinking. Both have their use, for play as well as work has its rightful place in the economy of life. But if a man plays all the time, he becomes lazy and shiftless and there is a relaxation of all his muscles, and he becomes demoralized and a burden to himself. If reading is *all* for amusement and under no controlling moral purpose and direction, the muscles of the mind become flabby, and instead of evolving intelligence, the faculties are dulled and dimmed and the very power of earnest thinking is well-nigh gone. In reading for amusement, we float simply; we give up all self-direction on a stream of words and drift along with the story. We only read that which comes very near to our own level. But to read with a moral aim, requires of us to grapple with books which are above our level; to gird up the loins of the mind; to sift, compare, concentrate and note down, with pen in hand, and arrange and find what is wheat and what is chaff, winnowing out the one and saving the other upon our palm-leaf. And this calls into exercise the higher ranges of the faculties; the power of attention, the power of intellect, the moral taste and the moral judgment, till the muscles of the mind get the consistency of iron. I think we overestimate the benefits which mere reading is calculated to give. We forget that in some of the grand epochs of history the greatest readers were the greatest dolts, and the men of the most practical common sense could hardly read at all.

Charlemagne, the master mind of his age, from whom more than from any one person modern history takes its rise, if I remember well, could neither read nor write, for all the learning was in the keeping of the monks, the narrowest and most senseless of all classes. Reading, like affairs, ought to enlarge our horizon and kindle our intelligence, and if it does not accomplish this, the art of printing might just as well not have been discovered, so far as we stand affected individually.

II. Reading then with a moral aim, what will be its special direction and purpose? Evidently the first thing which one will

want to know and understand will be the nature of the house he lives in. I mean the body which we inhabit, on whose conditions our work in the world so much depends. This mechanism which we call a body is wound up, so say the physiologists, to go an hundred years, and then to stop its motions gently and without pain. But instead of that it rarely runs down, but its wheels are crushed and broken on an average within less than forty years. The organic laws are the statute-book of the Almighty, written out within us by his own finger. All needless violation of them is intemperance in some form and the breaking of the Divine commandments. And it is just as much our duty to learn them and keep them as it is to learn and keep the ten commandments of the decalogue. For this is the very foundation of all our spiritual building and enlargement. Morbid conditions of the body often generate morbid conditions of mind. Anger in one may produce anger in the other, and the whole fabric of religious faith and hope go down in night because the physical flooring has been broken through and destroyed. A living writer tells us that the very foundations of womanhood here in America are becoming sapped and undermined; and that both manhood and womanhood will dwindle away together unless we come back to obedience. His array of facts is worthy of something better than senseless denunciation. They demand thoughtful study at least on the part of all teachers and parents, for manhood and womanhood go down together, if at all. It all shows us that there is one book, which at the beginning every one ought to read under a solemn sense of responsibility, — our own book of Life, which the psalmist calls the Book of God, in which all our members are written. It should be read till its lessons stand out in letters of light, and with the assurance that if disobeyed, they will turn to letters of fire. And when we read and understand, we are not only learning the Divine Laws and how to keep the commandments, we are drawn up among the Divine wonders beyond any which romance has ever told, and join in the adoration of the Psalmist, "I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

I do not mean to deny that there is a moral meaning in sickness, and moral uses of pain, and that sometimes the spirit within

puts on a clothing of beauty and grace which transfigures and hallows all this clay tabernacle, and shines even brighter through the rents made in it by disease and suffering. That, however, is when sickness comes in the order of the Divine Providence, and is received and accepted as such, and cannot be helped. But the normal state in which we best serve God and man is health, which means wholeness, — wholeness of mind, body and soul, in which all their consenting harmonies are a song of praise, for then we do not know where body ends and spirit begins, so perfect are their chimes and melodies. Very often a violation of physical law away back in childhood begins with slight derangement, which grows and grows into growling discords that shake the whole fabric into dust, just because a person would not read carefully this book, in which all his members are written, and read it under the injunction, "Fear God and keep his commandments," — the prime commandments written all over and within you.

III. And we come to a third condition, that in all our reading we observe carefully the laws of perspective. In reading books we simply put the glass to our eye for the enlargement of our vision. The field enlarges in two directions, one direction through space and one through time; one going round the globe and beyond the stars, and the other back through the ages to the beginning of things. But in this immense field things near are more important to us than things far. He who tries to explore this immense field indiscriminately will be lost and bewildered. Things that are near first, things that are far off afterward; things that lie about me first, my own state, my own people, involving the questions of to-day, that I may know how to act in my own sphere and how to vote and how best to discharge my duties to the community and country I live in. These come first; and there is biography, and romance which is veined with history, all of which can be selected and arranged so as to light up the sphere of my personal duties with growing illumination and kindle the fires of patriotism at the same time. With this controlling purpose, reading has a plan and a growing interest, and study and amusement get so blended that you hardly know where one stops and the other begins. Whether you are reading the American histories or the Cooper novels, they all combine to one end. They light up this sphere of American

life and manners and scenery, where the great modern drama is rolling along in which every young man and woman has a probation and a part to play. Reading with such a plan will be sure to touch one's enthusiasm, and when this has once been kindled it is the pledge of all true progress; for it wakes up a hunger and thirst which larger plans of reading and improvement are to satisfy. And then the perspective enlarges in both directions, taking in new fields of vision as long as we live, and revealing God in all history and all nature and giving unity to the whole.

IV. And this brings us to religious reading; though if one reads with a controlling moral purpose, it is all religious, or becomes so, at last. But then there is a separate class of what are called distinctively religious books, and it seems to me a capital mistake to read only what lies down upon our own level. A faith that is worth having is never gained in that way. It is gained by reading what is above our level, and demands concentration, and comparison, and sifting and analysis, and reconstruction, till we are drawn up into the heart of great subjects and are fired and greatedened by the themes.

Simplicity in religion becomes *exceedingly* simple when it only deals in vague generalities; and then too it becomes exceedingly commonplace and cold. Why did not the Lord give us merely the ten commandments and the ten beatitudes, and there leave us, or why did he not draw up a creed for us to learn out, and so save time and trouble? Because we want not merely the commandments, but we want inspiration and inward power, so that the obedience be glad, swift and spontaneous; and because the great doctrines of religion in their glory and amplitude cannot be put into a creed. They must be learned by a waking up of the faculties of the soul to see them in their harmony and beauty, and so fill us with their warmth and comfort. Hence we have a Bible which can be studied through a life-time, and on which eight thousand years of history are a commentary. And plans of religious reading well followed are a constant breaking of the seals. They keep breaking with some as long as they live, till communion with God is a prayer without ceasing, and the immortal life is so nearly realized in this, that the two worlds, the natural and the spiritual, are only halves of one harmonious system, interlacing

each other by fine golden threads of intercommunion. But such faith does not come of itself. It does not come by prayer merely. It comes from plans of reading, thinking, believing and doing, which a whole life-time is filling up, and which make the truths of religion and the whole scenery of the spirit-world lie on the landscapes of the soul with increasing warmth and effulgence. Simplicity! The alphabet is very simple. But if you stop with it, it never unlocks for you the wealth that lies in language. The first truths of religion are very simple, but if you stop with them you will never see their power and combination. And that we may see these, the Lord gives us one-seventh part of our time for religious reading and thinking, so that the alphabet of religion may combine in a language that spells out to us more and more of the divine riches.

To read with a moral purpose; to read our own book of life; to read with just perspective; to read with a controlling religious aim, so that the God in history and in the Bible shall be near us to-day, — these fourfold conditions once observed, books would not be to us a wilderness without order. We might carry with us the principles by which the knowledge we need would form and crystalize and enlarge forever. To read only what is interesting because it floats us easily, takes us down stream and takes us nowhere. To read only to excite the sensibilities over imaginary suffering, makes one more insensible to the real sufferings that lie in his daily path. Hence, novel reading as the staple food of the mind, leaves the intellect barren and the heart colder than ice; but under a moral purpose for the enlargement of our horizon and our knowledge of men, it has the same end that all history has; it interprets the great book of our human life. And the more we read with right aim and perspective, the more shall we see that all history is a drama with its unities and catch visions of a divine plan running through the whole from the beginning, interpreting Divine Revelation and showing how every act of the drama prepares the one which follows and leads on to some glorious catastrophe. The broad sweep of the Divine Providence across the theatre of this world will be seen in clearer illumination. The crimes and local tragedies that harrow and distress us will take their subordinate places, overruled and utilized in the grand march of humanity towards its goal.

Your own consciousness of being involved in this plan will become more vivid and more blissful, and your duties in it more imperative and more delightful. "I will hide you in a cleft of the rock," said Jehovah to his servant, "and cover your face as I pass." That is, you shall not see my face, but you shall see my train after I have passed along. You shall see me in all past history if you will read it, though you shall not see me before you so as to overwhelm and repress your own free and spontaneous agency. Glorious faith! that the whole past of the world, including our own little world of to-day, from the heights of the future shall be revealed as the bright train where the Infinite Father has passed along.

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REBECCA AMORY LOWELL.

We can imagine that to many of that wide circle who have associated some of the best memories of their lives with this venerated woman, just now taken from our midst, the first thought as they read her name upon our pages will be that we are doing her a wrong by so public a mention; for, perhaps, the most conspicuous trait in her character was that peculiar delicacy and modesty which made her shrink from publicity and almost refuse the grateful deference which her rare gifts and graces irresistibly commanded in the intercourse with society. But, on the other hand, they will remember that her constant desire always was how she might best serve others, and there is a power of service in the record of such a life which she would hardly decline to render. We feel that few things are more helpful, and more appropriate to the purpose of this Review, than the memorials of those who have so adorned and illustrated our Christian faith.

Miss Lowell was born in Boston, Nov. 13, 1794. Her father was John Lowell, son of Judge John Lowell, appointed by Washington Judge of the United States District Court. Her mother was Rebecca Amory.

At the age of nine years she accompanied her parents to Europe, and, during their three-years residence abroad, was placed by them in a school in Paris, where she surprised her schoolmates by her intelligence and the rapidity of her acquisitions. She, of course, acquired the French language and always spoke it with facility. Even at that early age she read Racine and Fenelon with delight. When a mere child she evinced a strong love of letters, and soon developed an enthusiasm for the beautiful and noble in literature, united to a delicate critical taste. But, along with this fondness for study and this intellectual development, was a no less remarkable development of character. Her sweet, gentle disposition made her universally beloved.

She completed her school education in Boston, and at the age of eighteen she undertook the education of her younger sister, then four years old, and of a little cousin. To their education she devoted the best portion of her time for twelve or thirteen years. After that she taught several of her nephews and nieces, as opportunity occurred, and a few other pupils. Her method of teaching was most systematic and painstaking. She attended to every branch of scholarship, writing for her pupils volumes of abridged histories, philosophies, &c., in French and in English, adding, by way of wholesome variety and stimulus, the reading aloud of poetry and romance and the best selections of light literature. There was a charm in her voice and in her enthusiasm which could not fail to inspire the young minds with a desire for culture and knowledge.

At a later period she was in the habit of receiving classes of young ladies at her home for the study of history and literature, and it was her delight besides to lend to young people from her rich store of books on every subject, and foster in them the love of useful learning.

Her care for the religious culture of her pupils was as constant as for their intellectual culture, and her influence in this direction was very great. In 1832 she began to teach in the Sunday-school, first at King's Chapel and then at Dr. Putnam's, in Roxbury, and continued this service without interruption till she had completed her seventieth year. She kept her classes five or six, and sometimes eight years, till the minds of her pupils became

mature, adopting, as in her secular instructions, thorough and systematic methods, bringing in illustrations from every department of literature and life, and seeking to train them to habits of accurate and conscientious thought on moral and religious questions and to stimulate their higher spiritual sentiments and desires. Very often young men continued in her class till they left for college or for business life, and some men now in the ministry can refer to her as one of those to whom they owe the most.

Since the death of her parents, in 1842, Miss Lowell has lived with her sister in Roxbury, and it is in connection with this portion of her life that she is chiefly known by the large portion of those who will read this notice. It was an attractive New England home, furnished without ostentation, but on a generous scale, and with tokens everywhere of culture and refinement, and the visitor was sure, not only of hospitable welcome, but of instructive and profitable occupation. She was ready to be interested in every subject. On all the topics of the day, political or social or literary, she had clear and decided opinions, and was ready to support them by argument or by illustration. Her memory was very remarkable, and her references to history and literature were accurate and full of value.

In questions of politics and moral reform she was very liberal. She was an early opponent of the system of slavery when such a course was unpopular with many with whom she was associated; but along with the intensity of her feelings and convictions there was such sweetness of temper and such tender sensibility that in her discussions she never wounded another's feelings, and she won by the contagion of her sympathy as much as by the force of her argument.

Her active benevolence was manifested by her generous participation in all the charitable and philanthropic and religious movements of the day. During these many years there have been few benevolent undertakings in this community to which she has not contributed, of counsel or money or of actual service, and she was ready to give her aid to causes or to individuals of whatever name or nation, with a sympathy as wide as humanity. One who knew it well fitly describes hers as "a life shared in just proportion between good deeds and good books, between the activity

of kindness and the repose of culture," "such a life as does not go out in darkness, but leaves a long trail of blessed influences behind." If we could summon the many men and women, now adorning society, who could testify that they have been indebted to her or to that home for much of what is most valuable in their character, we should realize how great and abiding the influence has been.

It remains only to speak of her religious character. She was a devoted Unitarian. Her interest in this form of faith began in the days of Dr. Freeman, for whom she had a great veneration. Afterwards she enjoyed greatly Dr. Channing, and shared in his opinions, and she was always earnestly watchful of everything that pertained to the interests of this denomination. She was liberal and open to every new phase of thought, and her convictions were all grounded in reason; but nothing could disturb the clearness and serenity of her faith. God was indeed her Father, and Jesus was her Master and her guide and her most loved Friend. She had a humble, childlike piety, and she cultivated it by daily devout reading and meditation, and it pervaded her whole being. In her activities and in her studies and in her conversation she seemed to carry with her the air of this communion with the unseen. It shone in her countenance and it gave her a peculiar sweetness and charm. She retained to the very day of her death perfect vigor of mind and freshness of feeling, with her last words testifying to the glad assurance of her Christian faith.

We have tried only to give in simplest outlines a sketch of her character, striving not to offend that sense of delicacy which would forbid words of eulogy, and all the while, as we have remembered how all this rare excellence kept itself from observation, we have rejoiced to think that there is much of this highest type of Christian living, nestled, fair and perfect, beneath the showy life of our time — as the lily of the valley, of which she was always peculiarly fond, hides its fragrance and beauty under its broad, green leaves.