

CHAPTER XXIII BAD BOOKS

The foregoing chapter has been devoted to showing the necessity of avoiding the proximate occasion of sin. There is one special occasion of sin which must be dwelt upon more at length. It is the reading of bad books.

Bad books are,

1. idle, useless books which do no good, but dis tract the mind from what is good;
2. Many novels and romances which do not appear to be so bad, but often are bad;
3. Books which treat professedly of bad subjects;
4. Bad newspapers, journals, miscellanies, sensational magazines, weeklies, illustrated papers, medical works;
5. Superstitious books, books of fate, etc.;
6. Protestant and infidel books and tracts.

There are certain idle, useless books which, though not bad in themselves, are pernicious because they cause the reader to lose the time which he might and ought to spend in occupations more beneficial to his soul. He who has spent much time in reading such books, and then goes to prayer, to Mass, and to Holy Communion, instead of thinking of God and of making acts of love and confidence, will be constantly troubled with distractions; for the representations of all the vanities he has read will be constantly present to his mind.

The mill grinds the corn which it receives. If the wheat be bad, how can the mill turn out good flour? How is it possible to think often of God, and offer to Him frequent acts of love, of oblation, of petition, and the like, if the mind is constantly filled with the trash read in idle, useless books? In a letter to his disciple Eustochium, St. Jerome stated for her instruction that in his solitude at Bethlehem he was attached to, and frequently read, the works of Cicero, and that he felt a certain disgust for pious books because their style was not polished. Almighty God, foreseeing the harm of this profane reading, and that without the aid of holy books the saint would never reach that height of sanctity for which he was destined, administered a remedy very harsh, no doubt, but well calculated to make him alive to his fault. He sent a grievous sickness on him, which soon brought the solitary to the brink of the grave. As he was lying at the point of death, God called him in spirit before His tribunal. The saint, being there, heard the Judge ask him who he was. He answered unhesitatingly,

“I am a Christian; I hold no other faith than Thine, my Lord, my Judge.”

“Thou liest,” said the Judge;

“Thou art a Ciceronian, for where thy treasure is, there thy heart is also.”

He then ordered him to be severely scourged. The servant of God shrieked with pain as he felt the blows, and begged for mercy, repeating in a loud voice,

“Have mercy upon me, Lord! have mercy upon me.”

Meanwhile, they who stood round the throne of that angry Judge, falling on their faces before Him, began to plead in behalf of the culprit, implored mercy for him, and promised in his name that his fault should be corrected. Then St. Jerome, who, smarting with pain from the hard strokes he had received, would gladly have promised much greater things, began to promise and to swear, with all the ardor of his soul, that never again would he open profane and worldly works, but that he would read pious, edifying books. As he uttered these words he returned to his senses, to the amazement of the bystanders, who had believed him to be already dead. St. Jerome concludes the narration of this sad history with these words:

”Let no one fancy that it was an idle dream, like to those which come to deceive our minds in the dead of night. I call to witness the dread tribunal before which I lay prostrate, that it was no dream, but a true representation of a real occurrence; for when I returned to myself, I found my eyes swimming with tears, and my shoulders livid and bruised with those cruel blows.”

He tells us, finally, that after this warning he devoted himself to the reading of pious books with the same diligence and zeal that he had before bestowed upon the works of profane writers. It was thus that Almighty God induced him to that study of divine things which was so essential to his own progress in perfection, and destined to do so much good to the whole Christian world.

It is true that in works like those of Cicero we sometimes find useful sentiments; but the same St. Jerome wisely said in a letter to another disciple:

“What need have you of seeking for a little gold in the midst of so much dross, when you can read pious books in which you shall find all gold without any dross?”

As to novels, they are, in general, pictures, and usually very highly wrought pictures, of human passions. Passion is represented as working out its ends successfully, and attaining its objects even by the sacrifice of duty. These books, as a class, present false views of life; and as it is the error of the young to mistake these for realities, they become the dupes of their own ardent and enthusiastic imaginations, which, instead of trying to control, they actually nourish with the poisonous food of phantoms and chimeras.

When the thirst for novel-reading has become insatiable as with indulgence it is sure to do they come at last to live in an unreal fairy-land, amidst absurd heroes and heroines of their own creation, thus unfitting themselves for the discharge of the common duties of this every-day world, and for association with every-day mortals. The more strongly works of fiction appeal to the imagination, and the wider the field they afford for its exercise, the greater in general are their perilous attractions; and it is but too true that they cast, at last, a sort of spell over the mind, so completely fascinating the attention that duty is forgotten and positive obligation laid aside to gratify the desire of unraveling, to its last intricacy, the finely-spun web of some airy creation of fancy. Fictitious feelings are excited, unreal sympathies aroused, unmeaning sensibilities evoked. The mind is weakened; it has lost that laudable thirst after truth which God has imprinted on it; filled with a baneful love of trifles, vanity, and folly, it has no taste for serious reading and profitable occupations; all relish for prayer, for the Word of God, for the reception of the sacraments, is lost; and, at last, conscience and common sense give place to the dominion of unchecked imagination. Such reading, instead of forming the heart, depraves it. It poisons the morals and excites the passions; it changes all the good inclinations a person has received from nature and a virtuous education; it chills by little and little pious desires, and in a short time banishes out of the soul all that was there of solidity and virtue. By such reading, young girls on a sudden lose a habit of reservedness and modesty, take an air of vanity and frivolity, and make show of no other ardor than for those things which the world esteems and which God abominates. They espouse the maxims, spirit, conduct, and language of the passions which are there under various disguises artfully instilled into their minds; and, what is most dangerous, they cloak all this irregularity with the appearances of civility and an easy, complying, gay humor and disposition.

St. Teresa, who fell into this dangerous snare of reading idle books, writes thus of herself:

“This fault failed not to cool my good desires, and was the cause of my falling insensibly into other defects. I was so enchanted with the extreme pleasure I took herein that I thought I could not be content if I had not some new romance in my hands. I began to imitate the mode, to take delight in being well dressed, to take great care of my hands, to make use of perfumes, and to affect all the vain trimmings which my condition admitted. Indeed, my intention was not bad, for I would not for the world, in the immoderate passion which I had to be decent, give any one an occasion of offending God; but I now acknowledge how far these things, which for several years appeared to me innocent, are effectually and really criminal.”

Criminal and dangerous, therefore, is the disposition of those who fritter away their time in reading such books as till the mind with a worldly spirit, with a love of vanity, pleasure, idleness, and trifling; which destroy and lay waste all the generous sentiments of virtue in the heart, and sow there the seeds of every vice. Who seeks nourishment from poisons? Our thoughts and reflections are to the mind what food is to the body; for by them the affections of the soul are nourished. The chameleon changes its color as it is affected by pain, anger, or pleasure, or by the color upon which it sits; and we see an insect borrow its lustre and hue from the plant or leaf upon which it feeds. In like manner, what our meditations and affections are, such will our souls become either holy and spiritual or earthly and carnal.

In addition to their other dangers, many of these books unfortunately teem with maxims subversive of faith in the truths of religion. The current popular literature in our day is penetrated with the spirit of licentiousness, from the pretentious quarterly to the arrogant and flippant daily newspaper, and the weekly and monthly publications are mostly heathen or maudlin. They express and inculcate, on the one hand, stoical, cold, and polished pride of mere intellect, or, on the other, empty and wretched sentimentality. Some employ the skill of the engraver to caricature the institutions and offices of the Christian religion, and others to exhibit the grossest forms of vice and the most distressing scenes of crime and suffering. The illustrated press has become to us what the amphitheater was to the Romans when men were slain, women were outraged, and Christians given to the lions to please a degenerate populace.

“The slime of the serpent is over it all.”

It instills the deadly poison of irreligion and immorality through every pore of the reader. The fatal miasma floats in the whole literary atmosphere, is drawn in with every literary breath, corrupting the very life-blood of religion in the mind and soul. Thus it frequently happens that the habitual perusal of such books soon banishes faith from the soul, and in its stead introduces infidelity. He who often reads bad books will soon be filled with the spirit of the author who wrote them. The first author of pious books is the Spirit of God; but the author of bad books is the devil, who artfully conceals from certain persons the poison which such works contain. Written, as they generally are in a most attractive, flowery style, the reader becomes enchanted, as it were, by their perusal, not suspecting the poison that lies hidden under that beautiful style, and which he drinks as he reads on.

But it is objected the book is not so bad. Of what do bad books treat? What religion do they teach? Many of them teach either deism, atheism, or pantheism? Others ridicule our holy religion and everything that is sacred. What morals do these books teach? The most lewd. Vice and crime are deified; monsters of humanity are held out as true heroes. Some of these books speak openly and shamelessly of the most obscene things, whilst others do so secretly, hiding their poison under a flowery style. They are only the more dangerous because their poisonous contents enter the heart unawares.

A person was very sorry to see that a certain bad book was doing so much harm. He thought he would read it, that he might be better able to speak against it. With this object in view he read the book. The end of it was that instead of helping others he ruined himself. Some say, “I read bad books on account of the style. I wish to improve my own style. I wish to learn something of the world.” This is no sufficient reason for reading such books. The good style of a book does not make its poisonous contents harmless. A fine dress may cover a deformed body, but it cannot take away its deformity. Poisonous serpents and flowers may be very beautiful, but for all that they -ire not the less poisonous. To say that such books are read purely because of their style is not true, because those who allege this as an excuse sometimes read novels which are written in a bad style. There are plenty of good books, written in excellent style, which are sadly neglected by these lovers of pure English.

To consult those books for a knowledge of the world is another common excuse for their perusal. Well, where shall we find an example of one who became a deeper thinker, a more eloquent speaker, a more expert business man, by reading novels and bad books? They only teach how to sin, as Satan taught Adam and Eve to eat of the

forbidden tree, under the pretense of attaining real knowledge; and the result was loss of innocence, peace, and Paradise, and the punishment of the human race through all time.

Some profess to skip the bad portions and read only the good. But how are they to know which are the bad portions unless they read them? The pretext is a false one. He only will leave the bad who hates it. But he who hates the bad things will not read the books at all, unless he be obliged to do so; and no one is obliged to read them, for there are plenty of good, profitable, and entertaining books which can be read without danger.

There is a class of readers who flatter themselves that bad books may hurt others, but not them; they make no impression on them. Happy and superior mortals! Are they gifted with hearts of stone, or of flesh and blood? Have they no passions? Why should these books hurt others and not them? Is it because they are more virtuous than others? Is it not true that the bad, obscene parts of the story remain more vividly and deeply impressed upon their minds than those which are more or less harmless? Did not the perusal of these books sometimes cause those imaginations and desires forbidden by Christian modesty? Did they not sometimes accuse themselves in confession of having read them? If not, they ought to have done so. Who would like to die with such a book in their hand? Readers of bad books who say such reading does not affect them should examine themselves and see whether they are not blinded by their passions, or so far gone in crime that, like an addled egg, they cannot become more corrupt than they already are.

See that infamous young man, that corrupter of innocence. What is the first step often of a young reprobate who wishes to corrupt some poor, innocent girl? He first lends her a bad book. He believes that if she reads that book she is lost. A bad book, as he knows, is an agreeable corrupter; for it veils vice under a veil of flowers. It is a shameless corrupter. The most licentious would blush, would hesitate to speak the language that their eyes feed on. But a bad book does not blush, feels no shame, no hesitation. Itself unmoved and silent, it places before the heart and imagination the most shameful obscenities.

A bad book is a corrupter to whom the reader listens without shame, because it can be read alone and taken up when one pleases. Go to the hospitals and brothels; ask that young man who is dying of a shameful disease; ask that young woman who has lost her honor and her happiness; go to the dark grave of the suicide; ask them what was the first step in their downward career, and they will answer, the reading of bad books.

Not long ago a young lady from Poughkeepsie, NY, who was once a good Catholic, began to read novels. Not long after she wished to imitate what she read, and to become a great lady. So she left her comfortable home, and ran away with another young lady to New York. There she changed her name, became a drunkard and a harlot, and even went so far in her wickedness as to kill a policeman. Here is the story, told in the woman's own words as given in the public press:

Fanny Wright, the woman who killed police officer McChesney, in New York, on the night of November 2, has been removed to the Tombs, and now occupies a cell in the upper tier of the female prison. The clothing stained with blood of her victim, which she has worn since her arrest, has been changed. In reply to interrogations she made the following statements respecting her life:

“About ten years ago I was living happily with my parents at Poughkeepsie, in this State. Nothing that I wished for was withheld. I was trained in the Roman Catholic faith, and attended to my religious duties with carefulness and pleasure until I was corrupted by a young girl of the same age, who was my school-fellow. She had been reading novels to such an extent that her head had become fairly upset, and nothing would do her but to travel and see the world! The dull life of a small country place like Poughkeepsie would not suit her tastes and inclinations, and from repeatedly whispering into my ears and persuading me that we would be great ladies, have horses, carriages, diamonds, and servants of our own, I finally reluctantly consented to flee from home, and we started together one beautiful night for the city of New York. [Here the poor woman gave way to tears, and sobbed hysterically.] On our arrival in this city we took up our quarters with Mrs. Adams, at No. 87 Leonard Street, and this was the place where I lost my virtue and commenced to lead a life of bitter, bitter

shame. My family ultimately succeeded in finding out my whereabouts and took me home, but I could not listen to the voice of reason. I felt that I had selected my mode of life, and was determined at all hazards to follow it out. I escaped a second time, and went back to Mrs. Adams's, where I was confined of a sweet little girl shortly afterwards. I used to keep myself very clean, and dressed with great care and tastefulness. From Mrs. Adams's I moved to Mrs. Willoughby's, at No. 101 Mercer Street, and lived there until the death of my little girl, three years ago; that had an awful effect upon me; I could not help taking to drink to drown my sorrow. From this period I date the commencement of my real hardships. My father emigrated to California, and I had no one left but a young brother; he tried to reform me, and also his poor wife; God bless her! She used to cry herself sick at my disgrace. Previous to this the young girl who accompanied me from home in the first instance fell out lucky, and got married. Drinking was the only pleasure of my life, and it was not long until it began to have its results; I was arrested and committed to the Island for six months; I got down before my time was up, and again took to liquor and street-walking. I used to walk all the time between Greene, Wooster, and Mercer Streets, in the Eighth Ward. I was soon arrested the second time, and sent up again for six months. During the last three years of my life, I have been sent on the Island six times altogether for drunkenness and disorderly conduct. On the night the officer was killed [here she gave way again to tears, and rocked herself around on the bed in a fearful manner], I was walking through the street, going home with message, and picking the kernels out of a hickory-nut with a small knife, when the officer came up to me; I was almost drunk at the time, and much excited; I did not know what I was doing, when on the impulse of the moment I struck him with the knife and killed him."

On Tuesday the brother of Fanny, a respectable young man, residing in the neighborhood of Poughkeepsie, called at the prison and had an interview with his sister. A more affecting scene, says the Express, it has seldom been our lot to witness. Although a strong, robust man, he fairly shook with emotion from a keen sense of grief and shame. He remained with her for nearly an hour. She was almost frantic with violent outbursts of grief, and after his departure became insensible.

Another young lady of the State of New York was sent to a convent school, where she received a brilliant education. She spoke seven languages. She wished to enter a convent, but was prevented by her parents. Her parents died, and after their death the young lady took to novel-reading. She soon wished to imitate what she had read; she wished to become a heroine. So she went upon the stage and danced in the "Black Crook." At last she fell one day on Second Avenue, in New York, and broke her leg in six places. She was taken to a hospital, where a good lady gave her a prayer-book. But she flung it away and asked for a novel. She would not listen to the priest encouraging her to make her confession and be reconciled to God. She died impenitent, with a novel in her hand.

Assuredly, if we are bound by every principle of our religion to avoid bad company, we are equally bound to avoid bad books; for of all evil, corrupting company, the worst is a bad book. There can be no doubt that the most pernicious influences at work in the world at this moment come from bad books and bad newspapers. The yellow-covered literature, as it is called, is a pestilence compared with yellow fever, and cholera, and small-pox are as nothing, and yet there is no quarantine against it. Never take a book into your hands which you would not be seen reading. Avoid not only notoriously immoral books and papers, but avoid also all those miserable sensational magazines and novels and illustrated papers which are so profusely scattered around on every side. The demand which exists for such garbage speaks badly for the moral sense and intellectual training of those who read them. If you wish to keep your mind pure and your soul in the grace of God, you must make it a firm and steady principle of conduct never to touch them.

Would you be willing to pay a man for poisoning your food? And why should you be fool enough to pay the authors and publishers of bad books and pamphlets, magazines, and the editors of irreligious newspapers for poisoning your soul with their impious principles and their shameful stories and pictures?

Go then, and burn all bad books in your possession, even if they do not belong to you, even if they are costly. Two boys in New York bought a bad picture with their pocket-money, and burned it. A young man in Augusta, GA, spent twenty dollars in buying up bad books and papers to burn them all.

A modern traveler tells us that when he came to Evora, he there on Sunday morning conversed with a girl in the kitchen of the inn. He examined some of her books which she showed him, and told her that one of them was written by an infidel, whose sole aim was to bring all religion into contempt. She made no reply to this, but, going into another room, returned with her apron full of dry sticks all of which she piled upon the fire and produced a blaze. She then took that bad book and placed it upon the flaming pile; then, sitting down, she took her rosary out of her pocket, and told her beads until the book was entirely burnt up.

In the Acts of the Apostles we read that when St. Paul preached at Ephesus, many of the Jews and Gentiles were converted to the faith. "And many of them that believed came confessing and declaring their deeds. And many of those who had followed curious arts brought together their books and burnt them before all. And counting the price of them, they found the money to be fifty thousand pieces of silver."

A young nobleman who was on a sea voyage began to read an obscene book in which he took much pleasure. A religious priest, on noticing it, said to him: "Are you disposed to make a present to Our Blessed Lady?" The young man replied that he was. "Well," said the priest, "I wish that, for the love of the most holy Virgin, you would give up that book and throw it into the sea" "Here it is, father," answered the young man. "No," replied the priest, "you must yourself make this present to Mary." He did so at once. Mary was not slow in rewarding the nobleman for the great promptness with which he cast the bad book into the sea; for no sooner had he returned to Genoa, his native place, than the Mother of God so inflamed his heart with divine love that he entered a religious order. †