

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PROPER CHOICE AND READING OF BOOKS.

This number contains the conclusion of the Catalogue of Books for Public School Libraries. The manner in which these books may be selected and used to the best advantage by readers generally, and especially by the young, now becomes a matter of great practical importance. On this point we adopt, without reserve, and commend to the careful attention of all concerned, the following *Cautions and Counsels*, which are extracted from the introduction to Dr. Potter's excellent "Hand-book for Readers and Students":—

1. Always have some useful and pleasant book ready to take up in "odd ends" of time. A good part of life will otherwise be wasted. "There is," says Wyttenbach, "no business, no avocation whatever, which will not permit a man who has an inclination to give a little time every day to the studies of his youth."

2. Be not alarmed because *so many* books are recommended. They are not all to be read at once, nor in a short time. "Some travellers," says Bishop Hall, "*hace more shrunk at the map than at the way*; between both, how many stand still with their arms folded."

3. Do not attempt to *read much or fast*. "To call him *well read* who reads *many authors*," says Shaftesbury, "is improper." "*Non refert quam multos libros*," says Seneca, "*sed quam bonos habeas*." Says Locke. "This is that which I think great readers are apt to be mistaken in: those who have read of everything, are thought to understand everything too; but it is not always so. Reading furnishes the mind only with *materials* of knowledge; it is *thinking* that makes what we read ours. *We are of the ruminating kind*, and it is not enough to cram ourselves with a great load of collections; unless we chew them over again, they will not give us strength and nourishment."

A mistake here is so common and so pernicious, that I add one more authority. Says Dugald Stewart, "*Nothing, in truth, has such a tendency to weaken, not only the powers of invention, but the intellectual powers in general, as a habit of extensive and various reading without reflection*. The activity and force of mind are gradually impaired, in consequence of disuse; and not unfrequently all our principles and opinions come to be lost in the infinite multiplicity and discordancy of our acquired ideas. It requires courage, indeed (as Helvetius has remarked), to remain ignorant of those useless subjects which are generally valued; but it is a courage necessary to men who either love the truth, or who aspire to establish a permanent reputation."

4. Do not become so far enslaved by any system or course of study as to think it may not be altered when alteration would contribute to the healthy and improving action of the mind. These systems begin by being our servants; they sometimes end by becoming masters, and tyrannical masters they are.

5. Beware, on the other hand, of frequent *changes* in your plan of study. This is the besetting sin of young persons. "The man who resolves," says Wirt, "but suffers his resolution to be changed by the first counter-suggestion of a friend; who fluctuates from opinion to opinion, from plan to plan, and veers like a weathercock to every point of the compass with every breath of caprice that blows, can never accomplish anything great or useful. Instead of being progressive in anything, he will be at best stationary, and more probably retrograde in all. It is only the man who carries into his pursuits that great quality which Lucan ascribes to Caesar, *nescia virtus stare loco*, who first consults wisely, then resolves firmly, and then executes his purpose with inflexible perseverance, undismayed by those petty difficulties which daunt a weaker spirit, that can advance to eminence in any line. Let us take, by way of illustration, the case of a student. He commences the study of the dead languages; presently comes a friend, who tells him he is wasting his time, and that, instead of obsolete words, he had much better employ himself in acquiring new ideas. He changes his plan, and sets to work at the mathematics. Then comes another friend, who asks him, with a grave and sapient face, whether he intends to become a professor in a college; because, if he does not, he is misemploying his time; and that, for the business of life, common mathematics is quite enough of the mathematics. He throws up his Euclid, and addresses himself to some other study, which, in its turn, is again relinquished on some equally wise suggestion; and thus life is spent in changing his plans. You cannot but perceive the folly of this course; and the worst effect of it is, the fixing on your mind a habit of indecision, sufficient in itself to blast the fairest prospects. No, take your course wisely, but firmly; and, having taken it, hold upon it with heroic resolution, and the Alps and Pyrenees will sink before you. The whole empire of learning will be at your feet, while those who set out with you, but stopped to change their plans, are yet

employed in the very profitable business of changing their plans. Let your motto be, *Perseverando vinces*. Practice upon it, and you will be convinced of its value by the distinguished eminence to which it will conduct you."

6. Read always the *best* and most recent book on the subject which you wish to investigate. "You are to remember," says Pliny the younger, "that the most approved authors of each sort are to be carefully chosen, for, as it has been well observed, though we should read much, we should not read many authors."

7. Study *subjects* rather than books; therefore, compare different authors on the same subjects; the statements of authors, with information collected from other sources; and the conclusions drawn by a writer with the rules of sound logic. "Learning," says Feltham, "falls far short of wisdom; nay, so far, that you scarcely find a greater fool than is sometimes a mere scholar."

8. Seek opportunities to *write and converse* on subjects about which you read. "Reading," says Bacon, "maketh a *full* man, conversation a *ready* man, and writing an *exact* man." Another benefit of conversation is touched upon by Feltham: "Men commonly write more formally than they practice. From conversing only with books, they fall into affectation and pedantry," and he might have added into many mistakes. "He who is made up of the press and the pen shall be sure to be ridiculous. Company and conversation are the best instructors for a noble nature." "An engagement and combating of wits," says Erasmus, "does in an extraordinary manner both show the strength of geniuses, rouses them and augments them. If you are in doubt of anything, do not be ashamed to ask, or if you have committed an error, be corrected."

9. Accustom yourself to refer whatever you read to the general head to which it belongs, and trace it, if a fact, to the principle it involves or illustrates; if a principle, to the facts which it produces or explains. "I may venture to assert," says Mr. Starkie, speaking of the study of the law, and the remark is equally applicable to other studies, "that there is nothing which more effectually facilitates the study of the law than the constant habit on the part of the student of attempting to trace and reduce what he learns by reading or by practice to its appropriate *principle*. Cases apparently remote, by this means are made to illustrate and explain each other. Every additional acquisition adds strength to the principle which it supports and illustrates; and thus the student becomes armed with principles and conclusions of important and constant use in forensic warfare, and possesses a power, from the united support of a principle, fortified by a number of dependant cases and illustrations; while the desultory, non-digesting reader, the man of indices and abridgments, is unable to bear in his mind a multiplicity of, to him, unconnected cases: and could he recollect them, would be unable to make use of them if he failed to find one exactly suited to his purpose."

10. Endeavor to find opportunities to *use* your knowledge, and to apply it in practice. "They proceed right well in all knowledge," says Bacon, "which do couple study with their practice, and do not first study altogether, and then practice altogether."

11. Strive, by frequent reviews, to keep your knowledge *always at command*. "What booteth," says an old writer, "to read much, which is a weariness to the flesh; to meditate often, which is a burden to the mind: to learn daily, with increase of knowledge, when he is to seek for what he hath learned, and perhaps, then, especially when he hath most need thereof? Without this, our studies are but lost labor." "One of the profoundest and most versatile scholars in England,"* says Mr. Warren, in his Law Studies, "has a prodigious memory, which the author once told him was a magazine stored with wealth from every department of knowledge. 'I am not surprised at it,' he added, 'nor would you be, or any one that knew the pains I have taken in *selecting and depositing* what you call my "wealth." I take care always to ascertain the *value* of what I look at, and if satisfied on that score, I most carefully stow it away. I pay, besides, frequent visits to my "magazine," and keep an inventory of at least everything important, which I frequently compare with my stores. It is, however, the *systematic disposition and arrangement* I adopt, which lightens the labors of memory. I was by no means remarkable for memory when young; on the contrary, I was considered rather defective on that score."

12. *Dare to be ignorant of many things*. "In a celebrated satire (*the Pursuits of Literature*), much read in my youth," says De Quincy, "and which I myself read about twenty-five years ago, I remember one counsel there addressed to young men, but, in fact, of universal application. 'I call upon them,' said the author, 'to *dare* to be ignorant of many things; a wise counsel, and justly expressed; for it requires much courage to forsake popular paths of knowledge, merely upon a conviction that they are not favorable to the ultimate ends of knowledge. In you, however, that sort of courage may be presumed; but how will you 'dare to be ignorant' of many things, in opposition to the cravings of your mind? Simply thus: destroy these false

* Lord Brougham.