

phers, poets, and divines, may be supplied to the remotest of our Canadian villages at less than one-third the price at which the English nobleman or mechanic can slake his thirst at the same fountains. By means of Library associations,—such as may easily be formed in every city and town, and such as I trust soon to see form part of the Public School System in every Township—I say by means of Library associations, not only the best works of living authors can be rendered accessible to our whole Canadian community; but we can—

“Turn back the tide of ages to its head,
And hoard the wisdom of the honour’d dead.”

We can, through the medium of the best translations, hold converse with Herodotus and Livy, with Demosthenes and Cicero, with Homer and Virgil, the same as with Paul and Moses, and David and Isaiah.

But, unhappily, the poison is everywhere mingled with the healthful food; bad books are as numerous as good ones, and are perhaps more widely read. Their moral leprosy spots the virgin heart of many an unsuspecting reader, and taints virtue and principle in their sources. It is the duty of all virtuous and intelligent persons to aid in resisting and, if possible, suppressing this growing evil. Good books are as important as good companions; and bad books are a formidable species of “evil communications which corrupt good manners.” More importance should be attached to the quality of books than to their number and variety; a sentiment long since expressed by SENECA, when he said—“*Non refert quam multos libros, sed quam bonos habeas.*” Thoughtful conversation with a few select friends will yield more profit than thoughtless conversation with a large and promiscuous company. It is the thinking, and not the most extensive, reader that acquires most knowledge. LOCKE has truly and quaintly said—“Reading furnishes the mind with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours. We are of a 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.” As much eating and little exercise, is injurious to bodily health; so much reading and little thinking enfeebles, rather than strengthens the mind. That acute metaphysician, DUGALD STEWART, expresses himself strongly on this point. “Nothing (he says) 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.”

But if the “extensive and various reading without reflection,” of even instructive and truthful books, impair the mental powers; what must be the effects of the “extensive and various reading,” as an amusement, of light literature and works of fiction? Such reading must not only enfeeble the mind, but pervert the taste and corrupt the imagination. Such works are as untrue to nature as they are false to morals. Their characters are not less monstrous in Society, than hippogriffs, centaurs, and mermaids in natural history; and they do equal violence to the mind, the passions, and the heart. Without adverting to that class of novels which outrage decency by the impure profligacy of both their expressions and illustrations, how pernicious are the effects of reading even the better class of them? They may cause tears to flow at the artistical picture of human distress; but do those tears ever open the hand for the relief of real distress? Sighs may be drawn forth over a fictitious object of misfortune and wretchedness, but will such sighs ever move the feet even to the next street or lane to visit and comfort a real object of equal misfortune and wretchedness? The heart may be made to glow at the fanciful portraiture of filial devotion and conjugal affection, but does that glow make the daughter more affectionate and submissive to the maternal cares and wishes, and the wife more devoted to the happiness and interests of her husband and home? Is the novel reading son the more virtuous, more manly, more industrious? Is it not notorious that the most extensive readers of the works of fiction are the least disposed to the real duties of life, and least contented under its cares and vicissitudes? The maudlin sentiment imbibed from the novelist is as alien to true love, true benevolence and compassion, as is the spectral agitation of the intoxicated brain to the healthful activity of sober reason. The heart enchanted by fairy ethicalities is

robbed of its native simplicity and tenderness; and the mind fed by fantasies loses its vigor for the stern duties of life, and is borne away by every illusion, like a bulrush upon the tide.

May not the wide circulation and perusal of works of fiction by our junior population, explain the philosophy of the remark so often made, that the growing up sons and daughters, with all their superior advantages of schools and books, are seldom equal to their fathers and mothers in mental and moral stamina, in self-denying energy and enterprising activity? Apart from its religious aspect, the question deserves the most serious consideration of parents and young people. For the mind to become great, its activity must be great, and it must not be the companion of foolish characters or foolish books; but it must dwell in familiar contact with great subjects and great characters; and these are to be found in works of moralists, philosophers and historians, and not in the legends and fictions of the whole race of the BULWERS and DUMASES, the DICKENSES and COOPERs of our age. And in order to form the loftiest conceptions and the most influential views of truth, of morals, of personal excellence, let us go to the Records of Inspiration—to the lives of prophets, apostles and saints; above all, let us bow down in the humble and daily contemplation of that Divine Character, which—to use the words of ROBERT HALL,—“borrows splendour from all that is fair, subordinates to itself all that is great, and sits enthroned on the riches of the universe.”

But it is the PERIODICAL PRESS, which, perhaps more than any other agency, is contributing to form the popular sentiments and taste of our country, and to influence its social advancement; and our newspaper sheet is almost our sole representative of the stately Reviews and literary Magazines, the weekly and daily papers of Great Britain and the United States. We

“Turn to the press—its teeming sheets survey,
Big with the wonders of each passing day;
Births, deaths, and weddings, forgeries, fires, and wrecks,
Harangues, and hailstones, brawls and broken necks.”
“It tells us of the price of stock—how much produce is worth;
And when, and where, and how, and why strange things occur on earth.
Has war’s loud clarion called to arms? has lightning struck a tree?
Has Jenkins broke his leg? or has there been a storm at sea?
Has the sea-serpent shown his head? or a comet’s tail been seen?
Or has some heiress with her groom run off to Gretna Green?
All this, and many wonders more, you from this sheet may glean.”

I doubt not, however, you will all agree with me, that the Canadian press does not altogether limit itself to the functions here indicated; but that it has sustained a position surpassed by the newspaper press of scarcely any other country in the discussion of some questions of civil government and public policy. But as the newspaper constitutes nearly the whole of the “Fourth Estate” in our periodical literature, how much is the country depending upon it for information and enlarged views on all questions of science, literature, and social polity, as well as common politics? The intellectual and moral constitution of society must be essentially effected by the character of the food periodically administered to it; and it will improve or decline just as that food consists of sound and varied knowledge, instinct with the spirit of candour, generosity and patriotism; or as it consists of harsh and coarse vituperation, administered in the spirit of selfishness and animosity. The free discussion of all questions of public interest, dictated by a spirit of intelligence and earnest investigation, and conducted in a tone of elevated moral philosophy, is a vivifying stream circulating far and wide over the social soil, and everywhere producing fertility and cheerfulness; but I know of nothing more vitiating to the public mind, minifying its views, enfeebling its energies, and embittering its kindest feelings, than a publication, whose periodical issues are so many successive indictments of fraud, robbery, and conspiracy against all who may entertain other opinions and other preferences than those of some of their fellow-countrymen. The animus of such a publication, in whatever interest it may be enlisted, is Russian despotism; and the virus of its spirit, as far as it penetrates, corrodes all the elements which combine in the advancement of society. The mission of the Canadian press is important beyond estimate; its field of labour is wide beyond comparison; it is the palladium of that freedom of thought which is essential to the happiness and dignity of man, and the channel of that unlimited inquiry by which the human faculties are advanced; it is the great school-master of society, with an ubiquity spreading over