

peace and happiness of those who gave you being, and commit suicide, also, upon your own most precious soul? Never! Yet if you will be persuaded to yield your heart to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgiveness, free, and full, and everlasting, will be lavished upon you. The wounds you have inflicted upon your earthly parents will be healed as if by miraculous touch; and your father on earth, and your Father in heaven, will joyfully exclaim, "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. For this my son was dead, and is alive again, he was lost, and is found."⁷

TRACT NO. 515 NOVEL-READING

Few persons suspect how many novels are written, and printed, and sold. There are about five thousand five hundred offered for sale in this country. If a man were to read one a week for seventy-five years, he would not be through the list. There are, of course, many novel-readers. Something on a great scale will be the result. What will it be; good or evil? Let us see.

It is natural to inquire, Who write novels? A few pious persons have written works which are sometimes called novels. But they are too serious for the gay, and too gay for the serious. So they are seldom read. Others are written by moral persons, who really seem anxious to teach some truth in an easy way. But nearly or quite all such are thought dull; and so they lie, covered with dust, on the shelves of the bookseller, are sent to auction, and used as waste paper. The popular novels of our day are, to a great extent, written by men who are known to be lax in principle, and loose in life. England and France contain no men who are more free from the restraints of sound morality, than their leading novelists. They are literal and "literary debauchees."

But do not novels contain many good things, which cannot be learned elsewhere? I answer, they do not. It is confessed that they never teach science. It is no less true, that they pervert history, or supplant it by fiction. This is throughout true of Walter Scott,¹ who has excelled all modern novelists in the charms of style. The literature of novels is commonly poor, and that of the best cannot compare with the standard English and French classics. Even Scott's best tales are intended to ridicule the best men, and to excuse or extol the worst men of their age. Like Hume,² he was an apologist of tyrants, whose crimes ought to have taken away both their crowns and their lives. I beseech you not to read novels. I will give my reasons.

⁷Reference to Jesus' story of the return of the prodigal son, Luke 15:11-32.

¹Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was an immensely popular Scottish novelist, who is considered by many to be the greatest English writer of historical novels.

²David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who wrote important works on epistemology and religious skepticism.

1. Their *general tendency* is to evil. They present vice and virtue in false colors. They dress up vice in gayety, mirth, and long success. They put virtue and piety in some odious or ridiculous posture. Suspicion, jealousy, pride, revenge, vanity, rivalries, resistance of the laws, rebellion against parents, theft, murder, suicide, and even piracy are so represented in novels as to diminish, if not to take away the horror which all the virtuous feel against these sins and crimes. Almost all that is shocking in vice is combined with some noble quality, so as to make the hero on the whole an attractive character. The thief, the pirate, and especially the rake, are often presented as successful, elegant, and happy. Novels abound in immodest and profane allusions or expressions. Wantonness, pride, anger, and unholy love, are the elements of most of them. They are full of exaggerations of men and things. They fill the mind with false estimates of human life. In them the romantic prevails over the real. A book of this sort is very dangerous to the young, for in them the imagination is already too powerful for the judgment.

2. Novels beget a *vain turn of mind*. So true is this, that not one in a hundred of novel-readers is suspected, or is willing to be suspected of being devout. Who by reading a novel of the present day was ever inclined to prayer or praise? Novel-reading is most unhappy in its effects on the female mind. It so unfits it for devotion, that even in the house of God levity or tedium commonly rules it. Thus practical atheism is engendered. The duties of life are serious and weighty. They whose trade it is to trifle and to nourish vanity, cannot be expected to be well-informed, or well-disposed respecting serious things. However much novel-readers may weep over fictitious misery, it is found that they generally have little or no sympathy with real suffering. Did you never know a mother to send away a sick child, or a daughter to neglect a sick mother, for the purpose of finishing a novel? If irreligion and impiety do not flourish under such influences, effects cannot be traced to causes.

3. The price of these books is often low, yet the *cost* of them in a lifetime is very great. Miss W. borrowed some books, yet she paid seventy dollars in one year for novels alone. Doing this for fifteen years, she would spend one thousand and fifty dollars. Yet her nephews and nieces were growing up without an education. Mrs. L. stinted her family in groceries, that she might have a new novel every month. Mr. C. pleaded want of means to aid to orphan asylum, yet he paid more than sixty dollars a year for novels for his daughters. Novels have, in the last five years, cost the people of the United States from twelve to fifteen millions of dollars. For one, they have paid thirty thousand dollars. This waste is wanton. No good is received in return.

4. Novel-reading is a great *waste of time*—time,

That stuff that life is made of,
And which, when lost, is never lost alone,
Because it carries souls upon its wings.

Nothing is so valuable as that which is of great use, yet cannot be bought with any thing else. We must have time to think calmly and maturely of a thousand things, to improve our minds, to acquire the knowledge of God, and to perform many pressing duties. The business of life is to act well our part here, and prepare for that solemn exchange of

worlds which awaits us. He whose time is spent without economy and wasted on trifles, will awake and find himself undone, and will "mourn at the last, when his flesh and his body are consumed, and say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof!"

5. The effects of novel-reading on *morals* are disastrous. Many young offenders are made so by the wretched tales which now abound. In one city, in less than three months, three youths were convicted of crimes committed in imitation of the hero of a novel. Here is a court of justice in session. Blood has been shed. Men are on trial for their lives. All the parties involved are intelligent and wealthy. The community is excited. Crowds throng the court-room from day to day. The papers are filled with the letters which led to the tragical end of one, and the misery of many. The whole scene is painful in the highest degree. Among the witnesses is one of manly form, polished manners, and hoary locks. Even the stranger does him reverence. His country has honored him. He must testify, and so sure as he does, he will tell the truth; for he has honor, and blood is concerned. He says, The husband of my daughter was "kind, honorable, and affectionate," and "if my daughter has been in an unhappy state of mind, I attribute it to the impure works of Eugene Sue and Bulwer."³ All these cases have been judicially investigated and published to the world. They have filled many a virtuous mind with horror, and every judicious parent with concern.

Nor is novel-reading a wholesome recreation. It is not a recreation at all. It is an ensnaring and engrossing occupation. Once begin a novel, and husband, children, prayer, filial duties, are esteemed trifles until it is finished. The end of the story is the charm. Who reads a novel a second time?

Some say, Others do it, and so may we. But others are no law to us. The prevalence of an evil renders it the more binding on us to resist the current.

Novel-reading makes none wiser, or better, or happier. In life it helps none. In death it soothes none, but fills many with poignant regrets. At the bar of God, no man will doubt that madness was in his heart, when he could thus kill time and vitiate his principles. I add,

1. Parents, know what books your children read. If there were not a novel on earth, you still should select their reading. Leave not such a matter to chance, to giddiness, or vice. Give your children good books. A bad book is poison. If you love misery, furnish novels to your children.

2. Young people, be warned in time. Many, as unsuspecting as you, have been ruined. Be not rebellious, to your own undoing. Listen to the voice of kindness, which says, Beware, beware of novels.

3. Pastors, see that you do all in your power to break up a practice which will ruin your young people, and render your ministry fruitless. I was shocked when I heard of one of you recommending a novel which exposed the arts of the Jesuits. The Jesuits are indeed bad, but not worse than Sue.

³Both Eugene Sue (1804–1857) and Edward George Earle Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873) were prolific novelists who wrote sensational, entertaining stories.

4. Booksellers, let me say a word. A young man, with a hurried manner, entered a druggist's shop and asked for an ounce of laudanum. It was refused. He went to another and got it, and next morning was a corpse. Which of these druggists acted right? You sell poison when you sell novels. They kill souls. You sell for gain. "Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it."⁴ You may make money by depraving the public morals, but for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

⁴Hab. 2:11.