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Example is Better Than Precept

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from which widowhood and the poor-house were a welcome refuge. His children are schooled and maintained by the parish.

My appetite is better than ordinary. It is, in truth, too much indulged, and not a few head-aches and nightmares have been the consequence. Venturing once, on the score of my woful experience, to admonish a young friend whom I saw entering the habit in which I was confirmed, he confuted me with the accustomed logical reply—"example," and so forth. Seven years afterwards saw him tottering on the grave's brink, with an incurable *dyspepsia*, the fruit of gluttony, and of glut-tony's usual attendant, indolence.

When a boy, I was a famous *climber*. Perched in a cherry tree one day, I saw a lad, clumsier than I was, going far out upon a slender branch. I cautioned him that it would break. "Did't I see you on it just now?" said he: "and there you are now, further out on a smaller limb! *Example's better*"—but before he could end the saying, his bough snapped, and he fell twenty feet, breaking a leg and dislocating a shoulder by the fall.

Another time, as I and a smaller boy were hunting, he walked over a creek upon a log, which he saw was just able to bear his weight, through rottenness. "You had better not venture," said he to me. But I said, I had always heard, *example was better than precept*, and following him, was soused by the breaking of the log, in six feet water. Being a good swimmer, I escaped with a ducking, (it was near Christmas,) and with wetting my gun, lock, priming, and all: so that it cost me a full hour to refit for sport.

It is not, however, commonly, either *immediate* or *bodily* harm that we incur by means of this Jack-o'-lantern proverb. Our faith in it is not sufficient to lead us into instant and obvious danger: it is in general the opiate with which we lull ourselves, only when the evil we are warned against is of the *moral* kind, or likely to occur at a remote period.

For the Southern Literary Messenger.

EXAMPLE IS BETTER THAN PRECEPT.

I NEVER read Jeremy Bentham's 'Book of Fallacies:' it is known to me only through the Edinburgh Review. I am uncertain whether it *gibbets* the above saying, or not; but no fallacy of them all better deserves to be hung up on high, for the admonition of mankind. There is none more mischievous, in the best filled pack of the largest wholesale proverb-peddler.

"*Example is better than precept!*"—is the constant plea, the invariable subterfuge, of those who do not want to follow good counsel. Be the counsel ever so sage—be the propriety and expediency of following it ever so manifest—if it perchance do not square to a T with the adviser's own practice, he is twitted with this sapient apothegm; and the advised party wends his way of folly as completely self-satisfied, as if he had demonstrated it to be the way of wisdom by an argument clearly pertinent, and mathematically unanswerable. Yet how is his argument more to the purpose—how is he more rational—than if he should refuse to take a road pointed out by a sign-board, because the board itself did not run along before him? May I not correctly show to others a way, which it is not convenient or agreeable for me to travel myself?

I could fill a book with the instances I have known, of people who have deluded themselves to their own hurt, by relying upon this same proverb.

For years, I have been a little given to drinking: not to excess, 'tis true—but more than is good for me. A sprightly younker, whose thirst appeared likely to become inordinate, being counselled by me to abstain altogether from strong waters, as the only sure resource of those afflicted with that propensity—told me, "*example was better than precept,*" and refused to heed the one, because he could not have the other also. He has since died a sot. The last three years of his existence were, to his wife, years of shame, terror, and misery,

In my youth, I read novels to a pernicious excess. They enfeebled my memory; unfixed my power of attention and my habits of thought; blunted my zest for history; dimmed my perception of reasoning; gave me the most illusory ideas of human life and character; and filled my brain with fantastic visions. A passion for learning, and the timely counsels of a sensible friend, subsequently won me so far from this career of dissipation, that I surmounted in some degree its evil effects, and acquired a moderate stock of solid knowledge: but to my dying day I shall feel its cloying, *unhinging*, debilitating influence upon my mental constitution. Still, even latterly, I have continued to indulge myself with the best novels, as they appeared. My weakness in this respect unluckily became known to a young girl, who seemed to be exactly treading in my footsteps; and whom I earnestly warned of the dangers besetting that path. "Now, cousin L., how can you talk so, when I have seen you *devouring* the *Antiquary*, and *Guy Mannering*, and *Patronage*, and I don't know how many besides! You need not preach to me: *example is better than precept.*" Therefore—for the reasoning seemed to her as conclusive as Euclids—therefore she went on, with undistinguishing voracity, through all the spawn of the novel press: and there is not now a sadder instance of the effects of novel-reading. After rejecting with dis-

tain three suitors every way her equals, (and in real merit her superiors,) because they were so unlike her famous novel heroes—did not woo on their knees or in blank verse—and had ‘such shocking, vulgar names’—she, at three and twenty, married a coxcomb, formed precisely after the model upon which her ‘mind’s eye’ had so long dwelt. He was gaudy, flippant, and specious; knew a dozen of Moore’s Melodies by rote; could softly discourse of the heart and its affections, as if he really possessed the one, and had actually felt the other; and, most irresistible of all, his name was EDWIN MORTIMER FITZGERALD. The result may be imagined. The society of such a being could not long please. Their conversation was a routine of insipid frivolity and angry disputes. With no definite principles of economy or of morals, he wasted his fortune and wrecked his health over the bottle and at cards—excitements, the usual resource of a weak, ill-cultivated understanding. She is now a widow, scantily endowed, at the age of twenty-seven. Her mind, too much engrossed by her darling pursuit to have learned, even in the impressive school of adversity, is nearly a blank as to all useful knowledge: imagination, paramount there over every other faculty, is prolific of innumerable fooleries; she can do no work beyond crimping a ruff or making a frill: and her nerves, shattered by tea, late hours, and sentimental emotion at fictitious scenes, threaten a disordered intellect and a premature grave.

To this impertinent adage, about *example* and *precept*, is it chiefly owing that I am at this moment a bachelor, aged fifty. I used it to parry the repeated instances made me by a friendly senior bachelor, to be “up and a doing,” in the journey towards matrimony. As the proverb commonly silenced him, it appeared to me at last, as it does to most people, a satisfactory answer; it was the lullaby, with which I hushed into repose every transient quail that his expostulations excited. My friend at length, in reasonable time, took me at my word, and added example to precept: he married, well and happily. But one obstacle or other, real or imaginary, had by this time confirmed me in my inactivity. Business occupied my time: chimerical visions of female excellence, in spite of my better reason, haunted me from the regions of romance, and made me hard to be pleased, even by merits which I was obliged to confess were superior to my own: courtship, by being long in view yet long deferred, came at length to appear clothed in embarrassment and terror: a failure, resulting (as vanity whispered,) purely from the awkwardness produced by embarrassment and terror, finally crushed all matrimonial aspirations: and, as it is now absurd to hope for a *love-match*, (a genuine novel-reader can brook no other) I am e’en trying to resign myself to the doom of perpetual celibacy.

’Twere needless to multiply examples. These suffice to shew, not only how absurd in reasoning, but how hurtful often in practice it is, to consider advice as at all the *less good*, for not being enforced by the giver’s example. That proverb has done as much harm in the world as the doctrine of the Pope’s infallibility, or of the divine right of kings; or as the silly saying, “*stuff a cold, and starve a fever;*” or, as (by its perversion) that unfortunate one, “*spare the rod, and spoil the child.*”

Yet, after all, the maxim I have been exposing is not untrue. *Example IS better than precept: DOES more ef-*

fectually shew the right way. But it is *fallacious*, and *mischievous*, by being misapplied. Instead of being regarded merely as a rebuke to the adviser, it is absurdly taken by the *advised* as a justification to himself in persisting in error. In most cases it is not even a *just rebuke* to the *adviser*: because ten to one there is *some dissimilarity of situation or of circumstances*, which makes it not expedient or proper for him to do what he nevertheless *properly* recommends to another. While I shew you your road—and shew it with perfect correctness—my own duty or pleasure may call me another way, or may bid me remain where I am. But the adage is *never* an apology for the advised party’s neglect of advice: and whenever he attempts to use it as such, his plea, though abstractly true, is impertinent—is nothing to the purpose.

M.