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Example is Better Than Precept

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pg. 39

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 giblets the above saying, or not; but no fallacy of them all better deserves to be hanging up on high, for the admonition of mankind. There is none more mischievous, in the best fitted pack of the largest wholesale precept-puller.

"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 wise—the propriety and expediency of following it ever so manifest—if it perchance do not square to the signer's own practice, he is castigated with this plea, the invariable subterfuge, of those who do not wish to be warned against is of the mortal kind, or likely to occur at a remote period. In my youth, I read novels to a pernicious excess. 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 preverb.

For years, I have been a little given to drinking: not to excess, this true—but more than is good for me. A sprightly younger, 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 sol. The last three years of his existence were, to his wife, years of shame, toil, and misery, from which widowhood and the poor-house were a welcome refuge. His children are reeducated 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 uncustomed logical reply—"example," and no forth. Seven years afterwards saw him tottering on the grave's brink, with an incurable dyspepsia, the fruit of gluttony, and of gluttony's usual attendant, indolence.

When a boy, I was a famous climber. Peached in a cherry tree one day, I saw a lad, clumsier than I was, going fast upon a slender branch. I cautioned him that it would break. "Didn'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 ventures," said he to me. But I said, I had always heard, example was better than precept, and following him, was saved 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 rest for sport.

It is not, however, commonly, either immediate or bodily harm that we incur by means of this Jack-of-all-trades preverb. Our faith in it is not sufficient to lead us into instant and obvious danger: it is in general the opine with which we fill ourselves, only when the evil we are warned against is of the mortal kind, or likely to occur at a remote period.

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 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, subduing, debilitating influence upon my mental constitution. Still, even bitterly, I have continued to indulge myself with the best novels, as they appeared. My weakness in this regard unhesitatingly 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 Satireur, and Gray's Mona-

 cereal, and Byron, 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 Euclid's—therefore she went on, with undistinguishing voracity, through all the span of the novel press: and there is not now a smaller instance of the effects of novel-reading. After rejecting with dis-

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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 country 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 impressively school of adversity, is nearly a blank as to all useful knowledge: imagination, paramount there over every other faculty, is prolific of insuperable foibles; she can do no work beyond compounding 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 adjure, about example and precept, is it candidly owing that I am at this moment a bachelor, aged fifty. I used it to purify the repeated instance made me by a friendly senior bachelor, to be "up and doing" in the journey towards matrimony. As the proverb commonly silenced him, it appeared to me at least, as it does to most people, a satisfactory answer; it was the truism, with which I paused into repute every transient qualm that his expectations 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, led by this time confirmed me in my inactivity. Business occupied my time: chimerical visions of female excellence, in spite of my better reason, hasted me from the regions of romance, and made me hard to be pleased, even by mericia which I was obliged to confess were superior to my own: embarrassed, 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 aspiations: and, as it is now absurd to hope for a face-match, (a genuine novel-brouter can break no other,) I am e'en trying to resign myself to the doom of perpetual celibacy.

"There were needless to multiply examples. These suffice to show, not only how absurd in reasoning, but how hurtful often in practice it is, to consider advice as 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 to 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 untruth. Example is better than precept: does more of