

**PROSE YOU
OUGHT TO KNOW**

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Prose you ought to know by John Raymond Howard

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JOHN RAYMOND HOWARD

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1849p

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P R E F A C E

TO spend leisure moments in a well-selected assemblage of poems is wisdom and delight, for the poets give us the condensed expression of the beautiful and the noble—like the attar of a thousand roses. Yet the prose writings of which the intelligent reader should know something are vastly more extensive than all the poetry, and it seems a gracious task to gather brief extracts from some of the famous and worthy, which may at least hint at the richness of an essay, a tale, a history, an oration, that has illumined the mind or thrilled the heart.

This is the aim of the present series of excerpts from prose works in the English language, the authors quoted being British or American. It is a matter of course that material has been included which other compilers would have passed by, and a multitude of names omitted which are quite worthy of inclusion. The permutations and combinations of taste are infinite, so that, even if not, according to the familiar proverb, beyond dispute, they should at least be accepted with the open mind, in the hope of edification. Certainly the authors are chiefly of the most distinguished, nearly all the works cited are among the best known, and the extracts given—many already familiar, because recognised as typical—are examples of the qualities which have given their authors high rank.

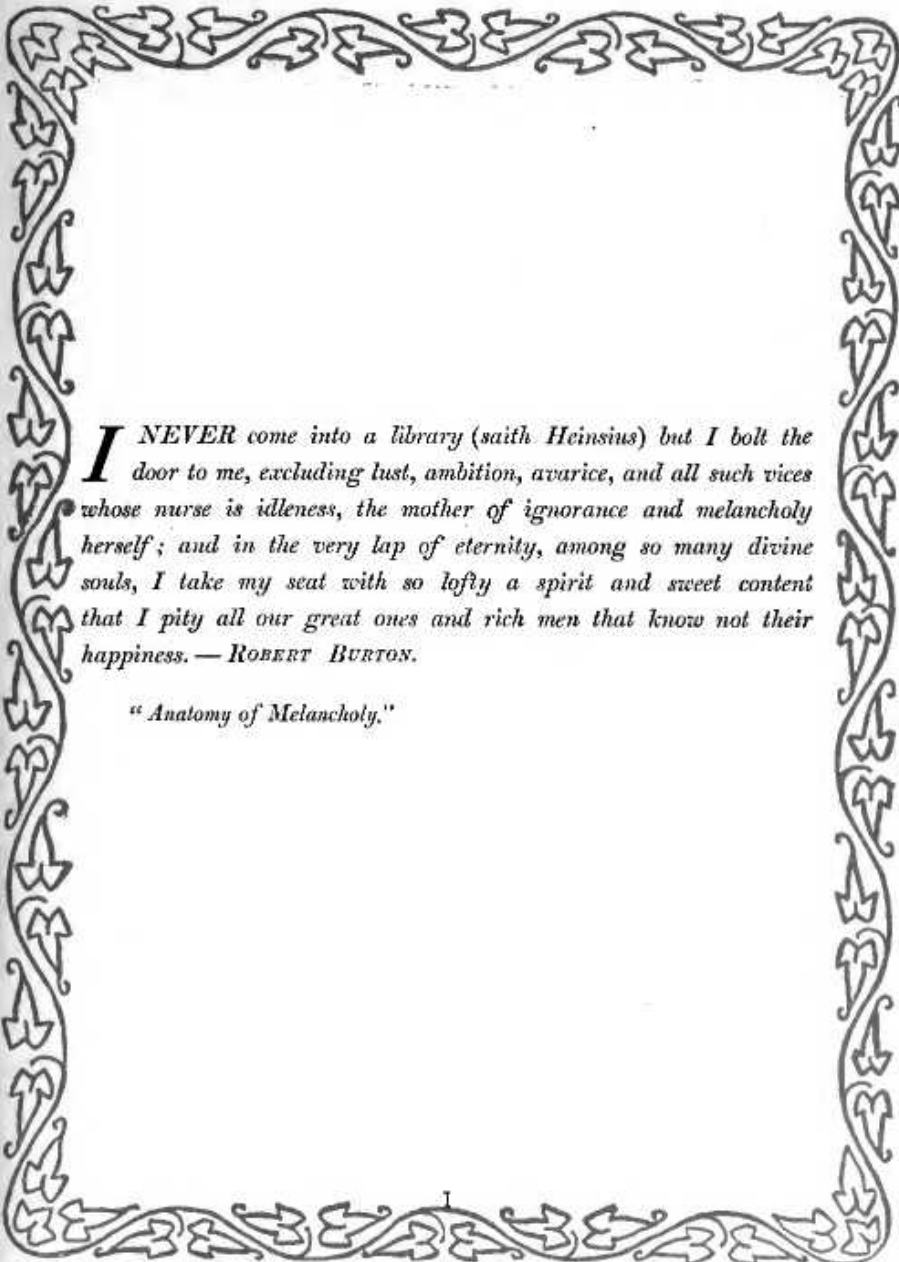
Since there is no attempt to give a systematic “view” of anything, the arrangement of this miscellany is informal,—a loose grouping of successive extracts which

A decorative border with a repeating floral and scrollwork pattern surrounds the text. The border is composed of stylized leaves and scrolls, creating a frame for the page's content.

PREFACE

treat of similar themes, the groups passing into one another without set limits. The list of authors (with titles and sources of the extracts) is made alphabetical, however, for easy finding of individual writers, and the names of the publishers of American authors are given, whether the material be in copyright or not, both for due credit and for the benefit of readers who would like to find more of any given author. The brief biographical notices prefacing the extracts may serve either for information or reminder, as the case may be.

It would have been easier, and far more satisfactory to the editor, to make the extracts longer; but the intent has been only to catch the interest, and suggest good company that may have been overlooked. If, then, these selected passages offer some inspiration to the discerning spare-minute reader, and incite a desire to know more of the work of those who have produced them, the object of the collection will have been fulfilled.



I NEVER come into a library (saith Heinsius) but I bolt the door to me, excluding lust, ambition, avarice, and all such vices whose nurse is idleness, the mother of ignorance and melancholy herself; and in the very lap of eternity, among so many divine souls, I take my seat with so lofty a spirit and sweet content that I pity all our great ones and rich men that know not their happiness. — ROBERT BURTON.

“Anatomy of Melancholy.”

A decorative border of stylized leaves and vines surrounds the text.

James Russell Lowell

1819-1891

If any man may be trusted to advise as to the reading of books, it surely is that fine scholar, keen critic, subtle wit, choice poet, elegant writer, and clear-headed commentator on public affairs, James Russell Lowell. With generous ardour in his early days, he advocated noble reforms, and—as in the humorous sarcasm of “The Biglow Papers,” the first series on the Mexican War and the second on the War of Secession — he lashed unworthy causes. Widely travelled, extensively read, he gave high tone, as editor, to the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *North American Review*, and as professor of Belles Lettres at Harvard upheld the refined traditions of that chair. His final public services as Minister to Spain (1877-80) and to Great Britain (1880-85) stood upon a high and honoured plane. His many writings of illuminative criticism make him a standard authority in literature.

WORTH AND CHOICE OF BOOKS

HAVE you ever rightly considered what the mere ability to read means? That it is the key which admits us to the whole world of thought and fancy and imagination; to the company of saint and sage, of the wisest and the wittiest at their wisest and wittiest moments? That it enables us to see with the keenest eyes, hear with the finest ears, and listen to the sweetest voices of all time? More than that, it annihilates time and space for us; it revives for us without a miracle the Age of Wonder,



JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

endowing us with the shoes of swiftness and the cap of darkness. . . .

We often hear of people who will descend to any servility, submit to any insult, for the sake of getting themselves or their children into what is euphemistically called good society. Did it ever occur to them that there is a select society of all the centuries to which they and theirs can be admitted for the asking, a society, too, which will not involve them in ruinous expense, and still more ruinous waste of time and health and faculties ?

Southey tells us that, in his walk one stormy day, he met an old woman, to whom, by way of greeting, he made the rather obvious remark that it was dreadful weather. She answered, philosophically, that, in her opinion, "*any* weather was better than none" ! I should be half inclined to say that any reading was better than none, allaying the crudeness of the statement by the Yankee proverb, which tells us that, though "all deacons are good, there's odds in deacons." Among books, certainly, there is much variety of company. . . . And the first lesson in reading well is that which teaches us to distinguish between literature and merely printed matter.

From : *Books and Libraries.*

Lord Chesterfield

1694-1773

Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield, was a gentleman by birth and breeding, and made admirable use of the fortunate advantages of his station. Early gaining a court appointment, he was also elected to Parliament, and on his father's death entered the House of Lords. He was an energetic and eloquent parliamentarian, a distinguished diplomat, a statesman of real efficiency. His clear mind, quick wit, elegant manners, and kindly disposition made him a universal favourite as well with such literary lights as Swift, Pope, and Johnson as with the polished circles of the court. He wrote somewhat for periodicals, but his "Letters to His Son" constitute his best known work, and will never lose their sense, wit, and aptness for guidance to the value of good manners.

GOOD BREEDING

A FRIEND of yours and mine has very justly defined good breeding to be the result of much good sense, some good nature, and a little self-denial for the sake of others, and with a view to obtain the same indulgence from them. Taking this for granted (as I think it cannot be disputed), it is astonishing to me that anybody who has good sense and good nature (and I believe you have both), can essentially fail in good breeding. As to the modes of it, indeed, they vary according to persons and places and circumstances, and are only to be acquired by observation and experience; but the substance of it is everywhere and eternally the same. Good manners are to particular societies what good morals are to society in general—their cement and security. And, as laws are enacted to enforce good morals, or at least to pre-