

***HARRIET
MARTINEAU***



***HOW TO OBSERVE:
MORALS AND
MANNERS***

***HARRIET
MARTINEAU***



***HOW TO OBSERVE:
MORALS AND
MANNERS***

Harriet Martineau

How to Observe: Morals and Manners

EAN 8596547122333

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I. REQUISITES FOR OBSERVATION.

INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I. PHILOSOPHICAL REQUISITES.

SECTION I.

SECTION II.

SECTION III.

SECTION IV.

CHAPTER II. MORAL REQUISITES.

CHAPTER III. MECHANICAL REQUISITES.

PART II. WHAT TO OBSERVE.

CHAPTER I. RELIGION.

CHAPTER II. GENERAL MORAL NOTIONS.

CHAPTER III. DOMESTIC STATE.

CHAPTER IV. IDEA OF LIBERTY.

CHAPTER V. PROGRESS.

CHAPTER VI. DISCOURSE.

PART III. MECHANICAL METHODS.

PART I.

REQUISITES FOR OBSERVATION.

[Table of Contents](#)

INTRODUCTION.

[Table of Contents](#)

"Inest sua gratia parvis."

"Les petites choses n'ont de valeur que de la part de ceux qui peuvent s'élever aux grandes."—DE JOUY.

THERE is no department of inquiry in which it is not full as easy to miss truth as to find it, even when the materials from which truth is to be drawn are actually present to our senses. A child does not catch a gold fish in water at the first trial, however good his eyes may be, and however clear the water; knowledge and method are necessary to enable him to take what is actually before his eyes and under his hand. So it is with all who fish in a strange element for the truth which is living and moving there: the powers of observation must be trained, and habits of method in arranging the materials presented to the eye must be acquired before the student possesses the requisites for understanding what he contemplates.

The observer of Men and Manners stands as much in need of intellectual preparation as any other student. This is not, indeed, generally supposed, and a multitude of

travellers act as if it were not true. Of the large number of tourists who annually sail from our ports, there is probably not one who would dream of pretending to make observations on any subject of physical inquiry, of which he did not understand even the principles. If, on his return from the Mediterranean, the unprepared traveller was questioned about the geology of Corsica, or the public buildings of Palermo, he would reply, "Oh, I can tell you nothing about that—I never studied geology; I know nothing about architecture." But few, or none, make the same avowal about the morals and manners of a nation. Every man seems to imagine that he can understand men at a glance; he supposes that it is enough to be among them to know what they are doing; he thinks that eyes, ears, and memory are enough for morals, though they would not qualify him for botanical or statistical observation; he pronounces confidently upon the merits and social condition of the nations among whom he has travelled; no misgiving ever prompts him to say, "I can give you little general information about the people I have been seeing; I have not studied the principles of morals; I am no judge of national manners."

There would be nothing to be ashamed of in such an avowal. No wise man blushes at being ignorant of any science which it has not suited his purposes to study, or which it has not been in his power to attain. No linguist wrings his hands when astronomical discoveries are talked of in his presence; no political economist covers his face when shown a shell or a plant which he cannot class; still less should the artist, the natural philosopher, the

commercial traveller, or the classical scholar, be ashamed to own himself unacquainted with the science which, of all the sciences which have yet opened upon men, is, perhaps, the least cultivated, the least definite, the least ascertained in itself, and the most difficult in its application.

In this last characteristic of the science of Morals lies the excuse of as many travellers as may decline pronouncing on the social condition of any people. Even if the generality of travellers were as enlightened as they are at present ignorant about the principles of Morals, the difficulty of putting those principles to interpretative uses would deter the wise from making the hasty decisions, and uttering the large judgments, in which travellers have hitherto been wont to indulge. In proportion as men become sensible how infinite are the diversities in man, how incalculable the varieties and influences of circumstances, rashness of pretension and decision will abate, and the great work of classifying the moral manifestations of society will be confided to the philosophers, who bear the same relation to the science of society as Herschel does to astronomy, and Beaufort to hydrography.

Of all the tourists who utter their decisions upon foreigners, how many have begun their researches at home? Which of them would venture upon giving an account of the morals and manners of London, though he may have lived in it all his life? Would any one of them escape errors as gross as those of the Frenchman who published it as a general fact that people in London always have, at dinner parties, soup on each side, and fish at four corners? Which of us would undertake to classify the morals and manners of

any hamlet in England, after spending the summer in it? What sensible man seriously generalizes upon the manners of a street, even though it be Houndsditch or Cranbourn-Alley? Who pretends to explain all the proceedings of his next-door neighbour? Who is able to account for all that is said and done by the dweller in the same house,—by parent, child, brother, or domestic? If such judgments were attempted, would they not be as various as those who make them? And would they not, after all, if closely looked into, reveal more of the mind of the observer than of the observed?

If it be thus with us at home, amidst all the general resemblances, the prevalent influences which furnish an interpretation to a large number of facts, what hope of a trustworthy judgment remains for the foreign tourist, however good may be his method of travelling, and however long his absence from home? He looks at all the people along his line of road, and converses with a few individuals from among them. If he diverges, from time to time, from the high road,—if he winds about among villages, and crosses mountains, to dip into the hamlets of the valleys,—he still pursues only a line, and does not command the expanse; he is furnished, at best, with no more than a sample of the people; and whether they be indeed a sample, must remain a conjecture which he has no means of verifying. He converses, more or less, with, perhaps, one man in ten thousand of those he sees; and of the few with whom he converses, no two are alike in powers and in training, or perfectly agree in their views on any one of the great subjects which the traveller professes to observe; the

information afforded by one is contradicted by another; the fact of one day is proved error by the next; the wearied mind soon finds itself overwhelmed by the multitude of unconnected or contradictory particulars, and lies passive to be run over by the crowd. The tourist is no more likely to learn, in this way, the social state of a nation, than his valet would be qualified to speak of the meteorology of the country from the number of times the umbrellas were wanted in the course of two months. His children might as well undertake to exhibit the geological formation of the country from the pebbles they picked up in a day's ride.

I remember some striking words addressed to me, before I set out on my travels, by a wise man, since dead. "You are going to spend two years in the United States," said he. "Now just tell me,—do you expect to understand the Americans by the time you come back? You do not: that is well. I lived five-and-twenty years in Scotland, and I fancied I understood the Scotch; then I came to England, and supposed I should soon understand the English. I have now lived five-and-twenty years here, and I begin to think I understand neither the Scotch nor the English."

What is to be done? Let us first settle what is not to be done.

The traveller must deny himself all indulgence of peremptory decision, not only in public on his return, but in his journal, and in his most superficial thoughts. The experienced and conscientious traveller would word the condition differently. Finding peremptory decision more trying to his conscience than agreeable to his laziness, he would call it not indulgence, but anxiety; he enjoys the

employment of collecting materials, but would shrink from the responsibility of judging a community.

The traveller must not generalize on the spot, however true may be his apprehension—however firm his grasp, of one or more facts. A raw English traveller in China was entertained by a host who was intoxicated, and a hostess who was red-haired; he immediately made a note of the fact that all the men in China were drunkards, and all the women red-haired. A raw Chinese traveller in England was landed by a Thames waterman who had a wooden leg. The stranger saw that the wooden leg was used to stand in the water with, while the other was high and dry. The apparent economy of the fact struck the Chinese; he saw in it strong evidence of design, and wrote home that in England one-legged men are kept for watermen, to the saving of all injury to health, shoe, and stocking, from standing in the river. These anecdotes exhibit but a slight exaggeration of the generalizing tendencies of many modern travellers. They are not so much worse than some recent tourists' tales, as they are better than the old narratives of "men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders."

Natural philosophers do not dream of generalizing with any such speed as that used by the observers of men; yet they might do it with more safety, at the risk of an incalculably smaller mischief. The geologist and the chemist make a large collection of particular appearances, before they commit themselves to propound a principle drawn from them, though their subject matter is far less diversified than the human subject, and nothing of so much importance as human emotions,—love and dislike, reverence and

contempt, depends upon their judgment. If a student in natural philosophy is in too great haste to classify and interpret, he misleads, for a while, his fellow-students (not a very large class); he vitiates the observations of a few successors; his error is discovered and exposed; he is mortified, and his too docile followers are ridiculed, and there is an end; but if a traveller gives any quality which he may have observed in a few individuals as a characteristic of a nation, the evil is not speedily or easily remediable. Abject thinkers, passive readers, adopt his words; parents repeat them to their children; and townspeople spread the judgment into the villages and hamlets—the strongholds of prejudice; future travellers see according to the prepossessions given them, and add their testimony to the error, till it becomes the work of a century to reverse a hasty generalization. It was a great mistake of a geologist to assign a wrong level to the Caspian Sea; and it is vexatious that much time and energy should have been devoted to account for an appearance which, after all, does not exist. It is provoking to geologists that they should have wasted a great deal of ingenuity in finding reasons for these waters being at a different level from what it is now found that they have; but the evil is over; the "pish!" and the "pshaw!" are said; the explanatory and apologetical notes are duly inserted in new editions of geological works, and nothing more can come of the mistake. But it is difficult to foresee when the British public will believe that the Americans are a mirthful nation, or even that the French are not almost all cooks or dancing-masters. A century hence, probably, the Americans will continue to believe that all the English make

a regular study of the art of conversation; and the lower orders of French will be still telling their children that half the people in England hang or drown themselves every November. As long as travellers generalize on morals and manners as hastily as they do, it will probably be impossible to establish a general conviction that no civilized nation is ascertainably better or worse than any other on this side barbarism, the whole field of morals being taken into the view. As long as travellers continue to neglect the safe means of generalization which are within the reach of all, and build theories upon the manifestations of individual minds, there is little hope of inspiring men with that spirit of impartiality, mutual deference, and love, which are the best enlighteners of the eyes and rectifiers of the understanding.

Above all things, the traveller must not despair of good results from his observations. Because he cannot establish true conclusions by imperfect means, he is not to desist from doing anything at all. Because he cannot safely generalize in one way, it does not follow that there is no other way. There are methods of safe generalization of which I shall speak by-and-by. But, if there were not such within his reach, if his only materials were the discourse, the opinions, the feelings, the way of life, the looks, dress, and manners of individuals, he might still afford important contributions to science by his observations on as wide a variety of these as he can bring within his mental grasp. The experience of a large number of observers would in time yield materials from which a cautious philosopher might draw conclusions. It is a safe rule, in morals as in physics, that no fact is without its use. Every observer and recorder

is fulfilling a function; and no one observer or recorder ought to feel discouragement, as long as he desires to be useful rather than shining; to be the servant rather than the lord of science, and a friend to the home-stayers rather than their dictator.

One of the wisest men living writes to me, "No books are so little to be trusted as travels. All travellers do and must generalize too rapidly. Most, if not all, take a fact for a principle, or the exception for the rule, more or less; and the quickest minds, which love to reason and explain more than to observe with patience, go most astray. My faith in travels received a mortal wound when I travelled. I read, as I went along, the books of those who had preceded me, and found that we did not see with the same eyes. Even descriptions of nature proved false. The traveller had viewed the prospect at a different season, or in a different light, and substituted the transient for the fixed. Still I think travels useful. Different accounts give means of approximation to truth; and by-and-by what is fixed and essential in a people will be brought out."

It ought to be an animating thought to a traveller that, even if it be not in his power to settle any one point respecting the morals and manners of an empire, he can infallibly aid in supplying means of approximation to truth, and of bringing out "what is fixed and essential in a people." This should be sufficient to stimulate his exertions and satisfy his ambition.

CHAPTER I.

PHILOSOPHICAL REQUISITES.

[Table of Contents](#)

"Only I believe that this is not a bow for every man to shoot in that counts himself a teacher, but will require sinews almost equal to those which Homer gave Ulysses; yet I am withal persuaded that it may prove much more easy in the essay than it now seems at a distance."—MILTON.

THERE are two parties to the work of observation on Morals and Manners—the observer and the observed. This is an important fact which the traveller seldom dwells upon as he ought; yet a moment's consideration shows that the mind of the observer—the instrument by which the work is done, is as essential as the material to be wrought. If the instrument be in bad order, it will furnish a bad product, be the material what it may. In this chapter I shall point out what requisites the traveller ought to make sure that he is possessed of before he undertakes to offer observations on the Morals and Manners of a people.

SECTION I.

[Table of Contents](#)

He must have made up his mind as to what it is that he wants to know. In physical science, great results may be

obtained by hap-hazard experiments; but this is not the case in Morals. A chemist can hardly fail of learning something by putting any substances together, under new circumstances, and seeing what will arise out of the combination; and some striking discoveries happened in this way, in the infancy of the science; though no one doubts that more knowledge may be gained by the chemist who has an aim in his mind, and who conducts his experiment on some principle. In Morals, the latter method is the only one which promises any useful results. In the workings of the social system, all the agents are known in the gross—all are determined. It is not their nature, but the proportions in which they are combined, which have to be ascertained.

What does the traveller want to know? He is aware that, wherever he goes, he will find men, women, and children; strong men and weak men; just men and selfish men. He knows that he will everywhere find a necessity for food, clothing, and shelter; and everywhere some mode of general agreement how to live together. He knows that he will everywhere find birth, marriage, and death; and therefore domestic affections. What results from all these elements of social life does he mean to look for?

For want of settling this question, one traveller sees nothing truly, because the state of things is not consistent with his speculations as to how human beings ought to live together; another views the whole with prejudice, because it is not like what he has been accustomed to see at home; yet each of these would shrink from the recognition of his folly, if it were fully placed before him. The first would be ashamed of having tried any existing community by an

arbitrary standard of his own—an act much like going forth into the wilderness to see kings' houses full of men in soft raiment; and the other would perceive that different nations may go on judging one another by themselves till doomsday, without in any way improving the chance of self-advancement and mutual understanding. Going out with the disadvantage of a habit of mind uncounteracted by an intellectual aim, will never do. The traveller may as well stay at home, for anything he will gain in the way of social knowledge.

The two considerations just mentioned must be subordinated to the grand one,—the only general one,—of the relative amount of human happiness. Every element of social life derives its importance from this great consideration. The external conveniences of men, their internal emotions and affections, their social arrangements, graduate in importance precisely in proportion as they affect the general happiness of the section of the race among whom they exist. Here then is the wise traveller's aim,—to be kept in view to the exclusion of prejudice, both philosophical and national. He must not allow himself to be perplexed or disgusted by seeing the great ends of human association pursued by means which he could never have devised, and to the practice of which he could not reconcile himself. He is not to conclude unfavourably about the diet of the multitude because he sees them swallowing blubber, or scooping out water-melons, instead of regaling themselves with beef and beer. He is not to suppose their social meetings a failure because they eat with their fingers instead of with silver forks, or touch foreheads instead of

making a bow. He is not to conclude against domestic morals, on account of a diversity of methods of entering upon marriage. He might as well judge of the minute transactions of manners all over the world by what he sees in his native village. There, to leave the door open or to shut it bears no relation to morals, and but little to manners; whereas, to shut the door is as cruel an act in a Hindoo hut as to leave it open in a Greenland cabin. In short, he is to prepare himself to bring whatever he may observe to the test of some high and broad principle, and not to that of a low comparative practice. To test one people by another, is to argue within a very small segment of a circle; and the observer can only pass backwards and forwards at an equal distance from the point of truth. To test the morals and manners of a nation by a reference to the essentials of human happiness, is to strike at once to the centre, and to see things as they are.

SECTION II.

[Table of Contents](#)

Being provided with a conviction of what it is that he wants to know, the traveller must be furthermore furnished with the means of gaining the knowledge he wants. When he was a child, he was probably taught that eyes, ears, and understanding are all-sufficient to gain for him as much knowledge as he will have time to acquire; but his self-education has been a poor one, if he has not become convinced that something more is needful—the enlightenment and discipline of the understanding, as well

as its immediate use. It is not enough for a traveller to have an active understanding, equal to an accurate perception of individual facts in themselves; he must also be in possession of principles which may serve as a rallying point for his observations, and without which he cannot determine their bearings, or be secure of putting a right interpretation upon them. A traveller may do better without eyes, or without ears, than without such principles, as there is evidence to prove. Holman, the blind traveller, gains a wonderful amount of information, though he is shut out from the evidence yielded by the human countenance, by way-side groups, by the aspect of cities, and the varying phenomena of country regions. In his motto, he indicates something of his method.

"Sightless to see, and judge thro' judgment's
eyes,
To make four senses do the work of five,
To arm the mind for hopeful enterprise,
Are lights to him who doth in darkness live."

In order to "judge through judgment's eyes," those eyes must be made strong and clear; and a traveller may gain more without the bodily organ than with an untrained understanding. The case of the Deaf Traveller[\[A\]](#) leads us to say the same about the other great avenue of knowledge. His writings prove, to all who are acquainted with them, that, though to a great degree deprived of that inestimable commentary upon perceived facts—human discourse—the Deaf Traveller is able to furnish us with more knowledge of foreign people than Fine-Ear himself could have done

without the accompaniments of analytical power and concentrative thought. All senses, and intellectual powers, and good habits, may be considered essential to a perfect observation of morals and manners; but almost any one might be better spared than a provision of principles which may serve as a rallying point and a test of facts. The blind and the deaf travellers must suffer under a deprivation or deficiency of certain classes of facts. The condition of the unphilosophical traveller is much worse. It is a chance whether he puts a right interpretation on any of the facts he perceives.

Many may object that I am making much too serious a matter of the department of the business of travelling under present notice. They do not pretend to be moral philosophers;—they do not desire to be oracles;—they attempt nothing more than to give a simple report of what has come under their notice. But what work on earth is more serious than this of giving an account of the most grave and important things which are transacted on this globe? Every true report is a great good; every untrue report is a great mischief. Therefore, let there be none given but by persons in some good degree qualified. Such travellers as will not take pains to provide themselves with the requisite thought and study should abstain from reporting at all.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that the study shown to be requisite is vast and deep. Some knowledge of the principles of Morals and the rule of Manners is required, as in the case of other sciences to be brought into use on a similar occasion; but the principles are few and simple, and the rule easy of application.

The universal summary notions of Morals may serve a common traveller in his judgments as to whether he would like to live in any foreign country, and as to whether the people there are as agreeable to him as his own nation. For such an one it may be sufficient to bear about the general notions that lying, thieving, idleness, and licentiousness are bad; and that truth, honesty, industry, and sobriety are good; and for common purposes, such an one may be trusted to pronounce what is industry and what idleness; what is licentiousness and what sobriety. But vague notions, home prepossessions, even on these great points of morals, are not sufficient, in the eyes of an enlightened traveller, to warrant decisions on the moral state of nations who are reared under a wide diversity of circumstances. The true liberality which alone is worthy to contemplate all the nations of the earth, does not draw a broad line through the midst of human conduct, declaring all that falls on the one side vice, and all on the other virtue; such a liberality knows that actions and habits do not always carry their moral impress visibly to all eyes, and that the character of very many must be determined by a cautious application of a few deep principles. Is the Shaker of New England a good judge of the morals and manners of the Arab of the Desert? What sort of a verdict would the shrewdest gipsy pass upon the monk of La Trappe? What would the Scotch peasant think of the magical practices of Egypt? or the Russian soldier of a meeting of electors in the United States? The ideas of right and wrong in the minds of these people are not of the enlarged kind which would enable them to judge persons in situations the most opposite to their own. The true

philosopher, the worthy observer, first contemplates in imagination the area of humanity, and then ascertains what principles of morals are applicable to them all, and judges by these.

The enlightened traveller, if he explore only one country, carries in his mind the image of all; for, only in its relation to the whole of the race can any one people be judged. Almost without exaggeration, he may be said to see what the rhapsodist in Volney saw.

"There, from above the atmosphere, looking down upon the earth I had quitted, I beheld a scene entirely new. Under my feet, floating in empty space, a globe similar to that of the moon, but less luminous, presented to me one of its faces.... 'What!' exclaimed I, 'is that the earth which is inhabited by human beings?'"[B]

The differences are, that, instead of "one of its faces," the moralist would see the whole of the earth in one contemplation; and that, instead of a nebulous expanse here, and a brown or grey speck there,—continents, seas, or volcanoes,—he would look into the homes and social assemblies of all lands. In the extreme North, there is the snow-hut of the Esquimaux, shining with the fire within, like an alabaster lamp left burning in a wide waste; within, the beardless father is mending his weapons made of fishbones, while the dwarfed mother swathes her infant in skins, and feeds it with oil and fat. In the extreme East, there is the Chinese family in their garden, treading its paved walks, or seated under the shade of its artificial rocks; the master displaying the claws of his left hand as he smokes his pipe, and his wife tottering on her deformed feet as she follows

her child,—exulting over it if it be a boy; grave and full of sighs if heaven have sent her none but girls. In the extreme South, there is the Colonist of the Cape, lazily basking before his door, while he sends his labourer abroad with his bullock-waggon, devolves the business of the farm upon the women, and scares from his door any poor Hottentot who may have wandered hither over the plain. In the extreme West, there is the gathering together on the shores of the Pacific of the hunters laden with furs. The men are trading, or cleaning their arms, or sleeping; the squaws are cooking, or dyeing with vegetable juices the quills of the porcupine or the hair of the moose-deer. In the intervals between these extremities, there is a world of morals and manners, as diverse as the surface of the lands on which they are exhibited. Here is the Russian nobleman on his estate, the lord of the fate of his serfs, but hard pressed by the enmity of rival nobles, and silenced by the despotism of his prince; his wife leads a languid life among her spinning maidens; and his young sons talk of the wars in which they shall serve their emperor in time to come. There is the Frankfort trader, dwelling among equals, fixing his pride upon having wronged no man, or upon having a son distinguished at the university, or a daughter skilled in domestic accomplishments; while his wife emulates her neighbours in supporting the comfort and respectability of the household. Here is the French peasant returning from the field in total ignorance of what has taken place in the capital of late; and there is the English artizan discussing with his brother-workman the politics of the town, or carrying home to his wife some fresh hopes of the interference of parliament

about labour and wages. Here is a conclave of Cardinals, consulting upon the interests of the Holy See; there a company of Brahmins setting an offering of rice before their idol. In one direction, there is a handful of citizens building a new town in the midst of a forest; in another, there is a troop of horsemen hovering on the horizon, while a caravan is traversing the Desert. Under the twinkling shadows of a German vineyard, national songs are sung; from the steep places of the Swiss mountains the Alp-horn resounds; in the coffee-house at Cairo, listeners hang upon the voice of the romance reciter; the churches of Italy echo with solemn hymns; and the soft tones of the child are heard, in the New England parlour, as the young scholar reads the Bible to parent or aged grandfather.

All these, and more, will a traveller of the most enlightened order revolve before his mind's eye as he notes the groups which are presented to his senses. Of such travellers there are but too few; and vague and general, or merely traditional, notions of right and wrong must serve the purpose of the greater number. The chief evil of moral notions being vague or traditional is, that they are irreconcilable with liberality of judgment; and the great benefit of an ascertainment of the primary principles of morals is, that such an investigation dissolves prejudice, and casts a full light upon many things which cease to be fearful and painful when they are no longer obscure. We all know how different a Sunday in Paris appears to a sectarian, to whom the word of his priest is law; and to a philosopher, in whom religion is indigenous, who understands the narrowness of sects, and sees how much smaller even

Christendom itself is than Humanity. We all know how offensive the prayers of Mahomedans at the corners of streets, and the pomp of catholic processions, are to those who know no other way than entering into their closet, and shutting the door when they pray; but how felt the deep thinker who wrote the *Religio Medici*? He was an orderly member of a Protestant church, yet he uncovered his head at the sight of a crucifix; he could not laugh at pilgrims walking with peas in their shoes, or despise a begging friar; he could "not hear an Ave Maria bell without an elevation;" and it is probable that even the Teraphim of the Arabs would not have been wholly absurd, or the car of Juggernaut itself altogether odious in his eyes. Such is the contrast between the sectary and the philosopher.

SECTION III.

[Table of Contents](#)

As an instance of the advantage which a philosophical traveller has over an unprepared one, look at the difference which will enter into a man's judgment of nations, according as he carries about with him the vague popular notion of a Moral Sense, or has investigated the laws under which feelings of right and wrong grow up in all men. It is worth while to dwell a little on this important point.

Most persons who take no great pains to think for themselves, have a notion that every human being has feelings, or a conscience, born with him, by which he knows, if he will only attend to it, exactly what is right and wrong; and that, as right and wrong are fixed and immutable, all