

Sir,

ALBEIT you may wish to avoid the dryness and dullness of political discussion in your Magazine, yet you must be sensible that in an age of *quidnunkery* like the present, it is not always possible to disregard the passing events of Europe. It has long, for example, been the fashion to advert to the horrid massacres which disgraced France during the tyranny of Robespierre; and, whatever a good and loyal subject happens to write, whether a history, a life, a sermon, or a posting bill, he thinks it his duty to introduce a due portion of his abhorrence and indignation against all such bloody proceedings. Happy, sir, would it be, if we could contemplate barbarity without adopting it; if we could meditate upon cruelty without learning it; and if we could paint a man without a head, without supposing what would be the case if some of our friends were without their heads. But, alas! so prone are we to imitation, that we have exactly and faithfully copied the SYSTEM OF TERROR, if not in our streets, and in our fields, at least W our circulating libraries, and in our closets. Need I say that I am adverting to the wonderful revolution that has taken place in the *art* of novel-writing, in which the only exercise for the fancy is now upon the most frightful subjects, and in which we reverse the petition in the litany, and riot upon `battle, murder, and sudden death.'

Good, indeed, it must be confessed, arises out of evil. If, by this revolution, we have attained the art of frightening young people, and reviving the age of ghosts, hobgoblins, and spirits, we have, at the same time, simplified genius, and shown by what easy process a writer may attain great celebrity in circulating libraries, boarding schools, and watering places. What has he to do but build a castle in the air, and furnish it with dead bodies and departed spirits, and he obtains the character of a man of a most `wonderful imagination, rich in imagery, and who has the wonderful talent of conducting his reader in a cold sweat through five or six volumes.'

Perhaps necessity, the plea for all revolutions, may have occasioned the present. A novel used to be a description of human life and manners; but human life and manners *always* described, must become tiresome; all the difficulties attending upon the tender passion have been exhausted; maiden aunts have become stale; gallant colonels are so common, that we meet with them in every volunteer *corps*. There are but few ways of running away with a lady, and not many more of breaking the hearts of her parents. Clumsy citizens are no longer to be seen in one horse-chaises, and their *villas* are removed from the bottom of Gray's Inn Lane, to the most delightful and picturesque situations, twelve or fifteen miles from London. Footmen and ladies' maids are no longer trusted with intrigues, and letters are conveyed with care, expedition, and secrecy, by the mail coach, and the penny-post. In a word, the affairs and business of common life are so perfectly understood, that elopments are practised by girls almost before they have learned to read; and all the incidents which have decorated our *old* novels, come easy and natural to the parties, without the assistance of a circulating library, or the least occasion to draw upon the invention of a writer of novels.

It was high time, therefore, to contrive some other way of interesting these numerous readers, to whom the stationers and trunk-makers are so deeply indebted, and just at the time when we were threatened with a stagnation of fancy, arose Maximilian Robespierre, with his system of terror, and taught our novelists that *fear* is the only passion they ought to cultivate, that to frighten and instruct were one and the same thing, and that none of the productions of genius could be compared to the production of an ague. From that time we have never ceased to `believe and tremble;' our genius has become hysterical, and our taste epileptic.

Good, I have observed, arises out of evil, or apparent evil: it is now much easier to write a novel adapted to the prevailing taste than it was. The manners and customs of common life being no longer an object for curiosity or description, we have nothing to do but launch out on the main ocean of improbability and extravagant romance, and we acquire a high reputation. It - having fallen to my lot to peruse many of these wonderful publications, previously to my daughters reading them (who, by the bye, would read them whether I pleased or not) I think I can lay down a few plain and simple rules, by observing which any man or maid, I mean, ladies' maid, may be able to compose from four to six uncommonly interesting volumes, that shall claim the admiration of all true believers in the marvellous.

In the first place, then, trembling reader, I would advise you to construct an *old* castle, *formerly* of great magnitude and extent, built in the Gothic manner, with a great number of hanging towers, turrets, and pinnacles. One half, at least, of it must be in ruins; dreadful chasms and gaping crevices must be hid only by the clinging ivy; the doors must be so old, and so little used to open, as to grate tremendously on the hinges; and there must be in every passage an echo, and as many reverberations as there are partitions, As to the furniture, it is absolutely necessary that it should be nearly as old as the house, and in a more decayed state, if a more decayed state be possible. The principal rooms must be hung with pictures, of which the damps have very nearly effaced the colours; only you must preserve such a degree of likeness in one or two of them, as to incline your heroine to be very much affected by the sight of them, and to imagine that she has seen a face, or faces, very like them, or very like something else, but where, or when, she cannot *just now* remember. It will be necessary, also, that one of those very old and very decayed portraits shall seem to frown most cruelly, while another seems to smile most lovingly.

Great attention must be paid to the tapestry hangings. They are to be very old, and tattered, and blown about with the wind. There is a great deal in the wind. Indeed, it is one of the principal objects of terror, for it may be taken for almost any terrific object, from a banditti of cut-throats to a single ghost. The tapestry, therefore, must give signs of moving, so as to make the heroine believe, there is something behind it, although, not being *at that time* very desirous to examine, she concludes very naturally and logically, that it can be nothing but the wind. This same wind is of infinite service to our modern castle-builders. Sometimes it *whistles*, and then it shows how sound may be conveyed through the crevices of a Baron's castle. Sometimes it *rushes*, and then there is reason to believe the Baron's great grandfather does not lie quiet in his grave; and sometimes it *howls*, and, if accompanied with rain, generally induces some weary traveller, perhaps a robber, and perhaps a lover, or both, to take up their residence in this *very same castle* where virgins, and virtuous wives, were locked up before the invention of a *habeas corpus*. It is, indeed, not wonderful, that so much use is made of the wind, for it is the principal ingredient in that sentimentality of constitution, to which romances are admirabl[y] adapted.

Having thus provided such a decayed stock of furniture as may be easily affected by the wind, you must take care that the battlements and towers are remarkably *populous* in *owls* and *bats*. The *hooting* of the one, and the *flitting* of the other, are excellent engines in the system of terror, particularly if the candle goes out, which is very often the case in damp caverns.

And the mention of caverns brings me to the essential qualities inherent in a castle. The rooms *upstairs* may be just habitable, and no more; but the principal incidents must be carried on in *subterraneous* passages. These, in general, wind round the whole extent of the building; but that is not very material, as the heroine never goes through above half without meeting with a door, which she has neither strength nor resolution to open, although she has found a rusty key, very happily fitted to as rusty a lock, and would give the world to know what it leads to, and yet she can give no reason for her curiosity.

The building now being completely finished, and furnished with all desirable imperfections, the next and only requisite is a heroine, with all the weakness of body and mind that appertains to her sex; but, endowed with all the curiosity of a spy, and all the courage of a troop of horse. Whatever she hears, sees, or thinks of, that is horrible and terrible, she must enquire into it again and again. All alone, for she cannot prevail on the timid *Janetta* to go with her *a second time*; all alone she sets out, in the dead of the night, when nothing but the aforesaid owls and bats are *hooting* and *flitting*, to resolve the horrid mystery of the moving tapestry, which threw her into a swoon the preceding night, and in which she knows her fate is awfully involved, though she cannot tell why. With cautious tread, and glimmering taper, she proceeds to descend a long flight of steps, which bring her to a door she had not observed before. It is opened with great difficulty; but alas! a rush of wind puts out the glimmering taper, and while Matilda, Gloriana, Rosalba, or any other name, is deliberating whether she shall proceed or return, without knowing how to do either, a groan is heard, a second groan, and a fearful crash. A dimness now comes over her eyes (which in the *dark* must be terrible) and she swoons away. How long she may have remained in this swoon, no one can tell; but when she awakes, the sun peeps through the crevices, for all subterraneous passages must have crevices, and shows her such a collection of skulls and bones as would do credit to a parish burying-ground.

She now finds her way back, determined to make a farther search next night, which she accomplishes by means of a better light, and behold! having gained the fatal spot where the mystery is concealed, the tapestry moves again! Assuming courage, she boldly lifts up a corner, but immediately lets it drop, a cold sweat pervades her whole body, and she sinks to the ground; after having discovered behind this dreadful tapestry, the tremendous solution of all her difficulties, the awful word

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Mr. Editor, if thy soul is not harrowed up, I am glad to escape from this scene of horror, and am,
Your humble servant,
A JACOBIN NOVELIST.
Greenwich, Aug. 19, 1797.