



George Moore, "Literature at Nurse: or, Circulating Morals", 1885 pamphlet, 22 pages.

This paper should have been offered to *The Nineteenth Century* but as, for purely commercial reasons, it would be impossible for any English magazine to print it, I give it to the public in pamphlet form.

In an article contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette* last December, I called attention to the fact that English writers were subject to the censorship of a tradesman who, although doubtless an excellent citizen and a worthy father, was scarcely competent to decide the delicate and difficult artistic questions that authors in their struggles for new ideals might raise: questions that could and should be judged by time alone. I then proceeded to show how, to retain their power, the proprietors of the large circulating libraries exact that books shall be issued at extravagant prices, and be supplied to them at half the published rate, or even less, thus putting it out of the power of the general public to become purchasers, and effectually frustrating the right of the latter to choose for themselves.

The case, so far as I am individually concerned, stands thus: In 1883, I published a novel called "A Modern Lover." It met with the approval of the entire press; *The Athenaeum* and *The Spectator* declared emphatically that it was not immoral; but Mr. Mudie told me that two ladies in the country had written to him to say that they disapproved of the book, and on that account he could not circulate it. I answered, "You are acting in defiance of the opinion of the press—you are taking a high position indeed, and one from which you will probably be overthrown. I, at least, will have done with you; for I shall find a publisher willing to issue my next book at a purchasable price and so enable me to appeal direct to the public." Mr. Mudie tried to wheedle, attempted to dissuade me from my rash resolution; he advised me to try another novel in three volumes. Fortunately I disregarded his suggestion, and my next book, "A Mummer's Wife," was published at the price of six shillings. The result exceeded my expectations, for the book is now in its fourth edition. The press saw no immoral tendency in it, indeed *The Athenaeum* said that it was "remarkably free from the elements of uncleanness." Therefore it is not with a failing but with a firm heart that I return to the fight—a fight which it is my incurable belief must be won if we are again to possess a literature worthy of the name. This view of the question may be regarded by some as quixotic, but I cannot forget that my first article on the subject awakened a polemic that lasted several weeks, giving rise to scores of articles and some hundreds of paragraphs. The *Saturday Review* wrote, "Michel Lévy saved France with cheap publications, who will save England?" Thus encouraged, I yield again to the temptation to speak upon a subject which on such high authority is admitted to be one of national importance. Nor do I write influenced by fear of loss or greed of gain. The "select" circulating libraries can no longer injure me; I am now free to write as I please, and whether they take or refuse my next novel is to me a matter of indifference. But, there are others who are not in this position, who are still debutants, and whose artistic aspirations are being crushed beneath the wheels of these implacable Juggernauts. My interest in the question is centred herein, and I should have confined myself to merely denouncing the irresponsible censorship exercised over literature if I did not hear almost daily that when "A Mummer's Wife" is asked for at Mudie's, and the assistants are pressed to say why the book cannot be obtained, they describe it as an immoral publication which the library would not be justified in circulating.

Being thus grossly attacked, it has occurred to me to examine the clothing of some of the dolls passed by our virtuous librarian as being decently attired, and to see for myself if there be not an exciting bit of bosom exhibited here and a naughty view of an ankle shown there; to assure myself, in fact, if all the frocks are modestly set as straight as the title Select Library would lead us to expect. Perhaps of all moral theories, to do unto others as you would be done unto meets with the most unhesitating approval. Therefore my *confrères*, of whose works I am going to speak, will have nothing to complain of. I shall commence by indicating the main outlines of my story of "A Mummer's Wife," appending the passage that gained it refusal at Mudie's; then I shall tell the stories of three fashionable novels (all of which were, and no doubt still are, in circulation at Mudie's Select Library), appending extracts that will fairly set before the reader the kind of treatment adopted in each case. The public will thus be able to judge between Mr. Mudie and me.

Now as to "A Mummer's Wife." Kate Ede is the wife of an asthmatic draper in Hanley. Attending her husband's sick-bed and selling reels of cotton over the little counter, her monotonous life flows unrelieved by hope, love, or despair. To make a couple of extra shillings a week the Edes let their front rooms, which are taken by Mr. Dick Lennox, the manager of an opera bouffe company on tour. He makes love to the draper's wife, seduces her, and she elopes with him. She travels about the actors, and gradually becomes one of them; she walks among the chorus, speaks a few words, says a few verses, and is eventually developed into a heroine of comic opera. The life, therefore, that up to seven-and-twenty knew no excitement, no change of thought or place, now knows neither rest nor peace. Even marriage—for Dick Lennox marries her when Ralph Ede obtains his divorce—is unable to calm the alienation of the brain that so radical a change of life has produced, and after the birth of her baby she takes to drink, sinks lower and lower until death from dropsy and liver complaint in a cheap lodging saves her from becoming one of the street-walkers with whom she is in the habit of associating. That is my story; here is the passage objected to: —

At last she felt him moving, and a moment afterwards she heard him say, 'There's Mr. Lennox at the door; he's kicking up an awful row. Do go down and open it for him.'

'Why don't you go yourself?' she answered, starting up into a sitting position.

'How am I to go? you don't want me to catch my death at the front door?' Ralph replied angrily.

Kate did not answer, but quickly tying a petticoat about her, and wrapping herself in her dressing-gown, she went downstairs. It was quite dark, and she had to feel her way along. But at last she found and pulled back the latch, and when the white gleam of moonlight entered she retreated timidly behind the door.

'I'm so sorry,' said Dick, trying to see who the concealed figure was, 'but I forgot my latch-key.'

'It does not matter,' said Kate.

'Oh, it's you, dear. I've been trying to get home all day to see you, but couldn't. Why didn't you come down to the theatre?'

'You know that I can't do as I like.'

'Well, never mind; don't be cross; give me a kiss.'

Kate shrunk back, but Dick took her in his arms. 'You were in bed, then?' he said, chuckling.

'Yes, but you must let me go.'

'I should like never to let you go again.'

'But you're leaving to-morrow.'

'Not unless you wish me to, dear.'

Kate did not stop to consider the impossibility of his fulfilling his promise, and, her heart beating, she went upstairs. On the first landing he stopped her, and laying his hand on her arm, said, ‘And would you really be very glad if I were to stay with you?’

‘Oh, you know I would, Dick.’

They could not see each other, and after a long silence she said, ‘We mustn't stop here talking. Mrs. Ede sleeps, you know, in the room at the back of the workroom, and she might hear us.’

‘Then come into the sitting-room,’ said Dick, taking her hands and drawing her towards him.

‘Oh, I cannot.’

‘I love you better than anyone in the world.’

‘No, no; why should you love me?’

Although she could not see his face, she felt his breath on her neck. Strong arms were wound around her, she was carried forward, and the door was shut behind her.

Only the faintest gleam of starlight touched the wall next to the window; the darkness slept profoundly on the landing and staircase; and when the silence was broken again, a voice was heard saying, ‘Oh, you shouldn't have done this! What shall I tell my husband if he asks me where I've been?’

‘Say you have been talking to me about my bill, dear. I'll see you in the morning.’

[Annotated extracts from these sensation novels:

Mrs Campbell Praed        *Nadine*

W.H. Mallock                *A Romance of the Nineteenth Century*

With the second concluding with this sardonic remark:]

*It being well known that I am no judge of such things, tell me, Mr. Mudie, if there be not in this doll just a little too much bosom showing, if there be not just a little too much ankle appearing from under this skirt? Tell me, I beseech you.*

The story of “Foxglove Manor,” by Robert Buchanan, reeks of the pulpit and the alcove. The hero is a young parson who uses religion for the purpose of seducing his congregation—he, in fact, uses it very much in the same way as Colonel Stapleton did the obscene photographs [in Mallock's novel]. When he has ruined Miss Edith Dove he deserts her for Mrs. Haldane, who, after much kissing and tying of pocket-handkerchiefs round swollen ankles, is saved from him by the machinations of her husband, a great scientist. On leaving Mrs. Haldane, the Rev. Mr. Santley muses to the following effect:—

I love this woman. In heart she loves me. Her spiritual endowments are mystically alive to those I myself possess. Her husband is a clod, an unbeliever, with no spiritual promptings. In his sardonic presence, her aspirations are I chilled, frozen at the fountain-head, whereas in mine, all the sweetness and the power of her nature are aroused, though with a certain irritation. If, I persist, she must yield to the slow moral mesmerism of my passion, and eventually fall. Is this necessarily evil? Am I of set purpose sinning? Is it not possible that even a breach of the moral law might under certain conditions lead us both to a higher religious place—yes, even to a deeper and intenser consciousness of God?

And again—

What is sin? Surely it is better than moral stagnation, which is death. There are certain deflections from duty which, like the side stroke of a bird's wing, may waft us higher. In the arms of this woman I

should surely be nearer God than crawling alone on the bare path of duty, loving nothing, hoping nothing, becoming nothing. What is it that Goethe says of the Eternal Feminine which leads us ever upwards and onwards? Which was the highest, Faust before he loved Marguerite, or Faust after he passed out of the shadow of his sin into the sphere of empirical and daring passion? I believe in God, I love this woman. Out of that belief, and that love, shall I not become a living soul?

Later on in the book we find a meeting between our libidinous clergyman and his victim Miss Edith Dove, described as follows—

She wore a light dress of some soft material, a straw hat, a country cloak, and gloves of Paris kid—a civilized nymph, as you perceive! To complete her modern appearance she carried a closed parasol and a roll which looked like music . . . And the satyr? Ah! I knew him at a glance, despite the elegant modern boots used to disguise the cloven foot. He wore black broadcloth and snowy linen, too, and a broad-brimmed clerical hat. His face was seraphically pale, but I saw (or fancied I saw), the twinkle of the hairy ears of the ignoble, sensual, nymph-compelling, naiad-pursuing breed.

In the third volume, in a chapter entitled “And lo! within her something leapt,” the result of the love encounter is made known to the reader.

She arose shivering; and at that very instant there came to her a warning, an omen full of nameless terror. It seemed to her as if faces were flashing before her eyes, voices shrieking in her ears; her heart leapt, her head went round and at the same moment she felt her whole being miraculously thrilled by the quickening of a new life within her own. With a loud moan, she fainted away upon the floor. When she returned to consciousness, she, was lying nearly naked by the bedside and the moonlight was flooding the little room.

*Now a writer like myself, whom you had proved to be no better than he should be, might be said to be capable of comparing a clergyman of the Church of England to a satyr, of even calling him “the snake of the parish,” but you, Mr. Mudie, Methodist or Baptist, I forget which you are, how can you allow such a book in your Select Library? Two old ladies in the country wrote to you about my “Modern Lover,” and you suppressed it; but did not one of the thousands of young ladies in the many thousand parsonages you supply with light literature write to tell you that papa was not “the snake of the parish,” and your great friend the British Matron, did she never drop you a line on the subject? Tell me, I beseech you.*

I say your great friend, my dear Mr. Mudie, because I wish to distinguish between you, for latterly your identities have got so curiously intervoven that it would need a critical insight that few—I may say none—possess, to separate you. Indeed on this subject many different opinions are afloat. Some hold that being the custodian of the national virtue you have by right adopted the now well-known signature as your *nom de plume*, others insist that the lady in question is your better half (by that is it meant the better half of your nature or the worthy lady who bears your name?), others insist that you yourself are the veritable British Matron. How so strange a belief could have obtained credence I cannot think, nor will I undertake to say if it be your personal appearance, or the constant communication you seem to be in with this mysterious

female, or the singularly obtrusive way you both have of forcing your moral and religious beliefs upon the public that has led to this vexatious confusion of sex. It is, however, certain that you are popularly believed to be an old woman; and assuming you to be the British Matron I would suggest, should this pamphlet cause you any annoyance, that you write to *The Times* proving that the books I have quoted from are harmless, and differ nowise from your ordinary circulating corals whereon young ladies are supposed to cut their flirtation teeth. The British Matron has the public by the ear, and her evidence on the subject of impure literature will be as greedily listened to as were her views on painting from the nude. But although I am willing to laugh at you, Mr. Mudie, to speak candidly, I hate you; and I love and am proud of my hate of you. It is the best thing about me. I hate you because you dare question the sacred right of the artist to obey the impulse of his temperament; I hate you because you are the great purveyor of the worthless, the false and the commonplace; I hate you because you are a fetter about the ankles of those who would press forward, towards the light of truth; I hate you because you feel not the sprit of scientific inquiry that is bearing our age along; I hate you because you pander to the intellectual sloth of to-day; I hate you because you would mould all ideas to fit the narrow limits in which your own turn; I hate you because you impede the free development of our literature. And now that I have told you what I think of you, I will resume my examination of the wares you have in stock.

Without in the least degree attempting to make an exhaustive list of the books which to my surprise this most virtuous literary tradesman consents to circulate, I may venture, to call attention to “Puck,” by Ouida. This is the history of a courtesan through whose arms, in the course of the narrative, innumerable lovers pass. “Moths,” by the same author, tells how a dissolute adventuress sells to her lover the pure white body and soul of her daughter, and how in the end Vera, disgraced and degraded by her ignoble husband, goes off to live with the tenor with whom she fell in love at the beginning of the story. In a book I opened the other day at haphazard, “Phillida,” by Florence Marryat, I find a young lady proposing to a young parson to be his mistress. It is true that the feelings that prompt her are not analysed, but does the cause of morals gain I wonder by this slightness of treatment?

It is not for me to put forward any opinion of my own. I have spoken of and quoted only from the works of writers longer and better known to the public than I am. They do not need defence against the Philistine charge of immorality, and it would be ridiculous for me—ostracised as I am by the founder and president of our English Academy, the Select Circulating Library—to accuse them, or even to hint that they have offended against the Mudie code more deeply than myself, I therefore say nothing. I cast no stone. All I seek is to prove how absurd and how futile is the censorship which a mere tradesman assumes to exercise over the literature of the nineteenth century, and how he overrules the decisions of the entire English press.

Were I indeed the only writer who has suffered from this odious tyranny the subject might well be permitted to drop. Many cases might be brought forward, but I will not look further than last month. I am informed on good authority that on being written to repeatedly for a book called “Leicester,” Mr. Mudie sent back word to the Athenaeum Club that he did not keep naturalistic literature—that he did not consider it “proper.” And thus an interesting, if not a very successful, literary experiment is stamped out of sight, and the strange paradox of a tradesman dictating to

the bishops of England what is proper and improper for them to read is insolently thrust upon us. However the matter has been brought before the committee of the club, and the advisability of withdrawing the subscription from this too virtuous library is under consideration.

It has been and will be again advanced that it is impossible to force a man to buy goods if he does not choose to do so: but with every privilege comes a duty. Mr. Mudie possesses a monopoly, and he cannot be allowed to use that monopoly to the detriment of all interests but his own. But even if this were not so, it is no less my right to point out to the public, that the character for strength, virility, and purpose, which our literature has always held, the old literary tradition coming down to us through a long line of glorious ancestors, is being gradually obliterated to suit the commercial views of a narrow-minded tradesman. Instead of being allowed to fight, with and amid, the thoughts and aspirations of men, literature is now rocked to an ignoble rest in the motherly arms of the librarian. That of which he approves is fed with gold; that from which he turns the breast dies like a vagrant's child; while in and out of his voluminous skirts run a motley and monstrous progeny, a callow, a whining, a puking brood of bastard bantlings, a race of Aztecs that disgrace the intelligence of the English nation. Into this nursery none can enter except in baby clothes; and the task of discriminating between a divided skirt and a pair of trousers is performed by the librarian. Deftly his fingers lift skirt and under-skirt, and if the examination prove satisfactory the sometimes decently attired dolls are packed in tin-cornered boxes and scattered through every drawing-room in the kingdom, to be in rocking-chairs fingered and fondled by the "young person" until she longs for some newer fashion in literary frills and furbelows. Mudie is the law we labour after; the suffrage of young women we are supposed to gain: the paradise of the English novelist is in the school-room: he is read there or nowhere. And yet it is certain that never in any age or country have writers been asked to write under such restricted conditions; if the same test by which modern writers are judged were applied to their forefathers, three-fourths of the contents of our libraries would have to be condemned as immoral publications. Now of the value of conventional innocence I don't pretend to judge, but I cannot help thinking that the cultivation of this curiosity is likely to run the nation into literary losses of some magnitude.

It will be said that genius triumphs over circumstances, but I am not sure that this is absolutely the case; and turning to Mr. Mathew Arnold, I find that he is of the same opinion. He says, ... "but it must have the atmosphere, it must find itself in the order ideas, to work freely, and this is not so easy to command. This is why the great creative epochs in literature are so rare ... because for the creation of a master work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment; the creative has for its happy exercise appointed elements, and those elements are not in its own control." I agree with Mr. Mathew Arnold. Genius is a natural production, just as are chickweed and roses; under certain conditions it matures; under others it dies; and the deplorable dearth of talent among the novelists of to-day is owing to the action of the circulating library, which for the last thirty years has been staying the current of ideas, and quietly opposing the development of fresh thought. The poetry, the history, the biographies written in our time will live because they represent the best ideas of our time; but no novel written within the last ten years will live through a generation, because no writer pretends to deal with the moral and religious feeling of his day; and without that no writer will, no writer ever has been able to, invest his world with sufficient vitality to resist twenty years of criticism.

When a book is bought it is read because the reader hopes to find an expression of ideas of the existence of which he is already dimly conscious. A literature produced to meet such hopes must of necessity be at once national and pregnant with the thought of the epoch in which it is written. Books, on the contrary, that are sent by the librarian to be returned in a few days, are glanced at with indifference, at most with the vapid curiosity with which we examine the landscape of a strange country seen through a railway-carriage window. The bond of sympathy, that should exist between reader and, writer is broken—a bond as sacred and as intimate as that which unites the tree to the earth—and those who do not live in communion with the thought of their age are enabled to sell their characterless trash; and a writer who is well known can command as large a sale for a bad book as a good one. The struggle for existence, therefore, no longer exists; the librarian rules the roost; he crows, and every chanticleer pitches his note in the same key. He, not the ladies and gentlemen who place their names on the title-pages, is the author of modern English fiction. He models it, fashions it to suit his purpose, and the artistic individualities of his employés count for as little as that of the makers of the pill-boxes in which are sold certain well-known and mildly purgative medicines. And in accordance with his wishes English fiction now consists of either a sentimental misunderstanding, which is happily cleared up in the end, or of singular escapes over the edge of precipices, and miraculous recoveries of one or more of the senses of which the hero was deprived, until the time has come for the author to bring his tale to a close. The novel of observation, of analysis, exists no longer among us. Why? Because the librarian does not feel as safe in circulating a study of life and manners as a tale concerning a lost will.

To analyze, you must have a subject; a religious or sensual passion is as necessary to the realistic novelist as a disease to the physician. The dissection of a healthy subject would not, as a rule, prove interesting, and if the right to probe and comment on humanity's frailties be granted, what becomes of the pretty schoolroom with its piano tinkling away at the "Maiden's Prayer," and the water-colour drawings representing mill-wheels and Welsh castles? The British mamma is determined that her daughter shall know nothing of life until she is married; at all events, that if she should learn anything, there should be no proof of her knowledge lying about the place—a book would be a proof; consequently the English novel is made so that it will fit in with the "Maiden's Prayer" and the water-mill. And as we are a thoroughly practical nation, the work is done thoroughly; root and branch are swept away, and we begin on a fresh basis, just as if Shakespeare and Ben Jonson had never existed. A novelist may say, "I do not wish to enter into those pretty schoolrooms. I agree with you, my book is not fit reading for young girls; but does this prove that I have written an immoral book?" The librarian answers, "I cater for the masses, and the masses are young unmarried women who are supposed to know but one side of life. I cannot therefore take your book." And so it comes to pass that English literature is sacrificed on the altar of Hymen.

But let me not be misunderstood. I would not have it supposed that I am of opinion that literature can be glorified in the Temples of Venus. Were the freedom of speech I ask for to lead to this, we should have done no more than to have substituted one evil for another. There is a middle course, and I think it is this—to write as grown-up men and women talk of life's passions and duties. On one hand there must be no giggling over stories whispered in the corners of rooms; on the other, there must be no mock moral squeamishness about speaking of vice. We

must write as our poems, our histories, our biographies are written, and give up once and for ever asking that most silly of all silly questions, “Can my daughter of eighteen read this book?” Let us renounce the effort to reconcile those two irreconcilable things—art and young girls. That these young people should be provided with a literature suited to their age and taste, no artist will deny; all I ask is that some means may be devised by which the novelist will be allowed to describe the moral and religious feeling of his day as he perceives it to exist, and to be forced no longer to write with a view of helping parents and guardians to bring up their charges in all the traditional beliefs.

It is doubtless a terrible thing to advocate the breaking down of the thirty-one and sixpenny safeguards, and to place it in the power of a young girl to buy an immoral book if she chooses to do so; but I am afraid it cannot be helped. Important an element as she undoubtedly is in our sociological system, still we must not lose sight of everything but her; and that the nineteenth century should possess a literature characteristic of its nervous, passionate life, I hold is as desirable, and would be as far-reaching in its effects, as the biggest franchise bill ever planned. But even for the alarmed mother I have a word of consolation. For should her daughter, when our novels are sold for half-a-crown in a paper cover, become possessed of one written by a member of the school to which I have the honour to belong, I will vouch that no unfortunate results are the consequence of the reading. The close analysis of a passion has no attraction for the young girl. When she is seduced through the influence of a novel, it is by a romantic story, the action of which is laid outside the limits of her experience. A pair of lovers—such as Paul and Virginia—separated by cruel fate, whose lives are apparently nothing but a long cry of yearning and fidelity, who seem to live, as it were, independent of the struggle for life, is the book that more often than any other leads to sin; it teaches the reader to look to a false ideal, and gives her—for men have ceased to read novels in England—erroneous and superficial notions of the value of life and love.

All these evils are inherent in the “select” circulating library, but when in addition it sets up a censorship and suppresses works of which it does not approve, it is time to appeal to the public to put an end to such dictatorship, in a very practical way, by withdrawing its support from any library that refuses to supply the books it desires to read.

GEORGE MOORE.