

A DEFENCE OF USEFUL INFORMATION

It is natural and proper enough that the masses of explosive ammunition stored up in detective stories and the replete and solid sweet-stuff shops which are called sentimental novelettes should be popular with the ordinary customer. It is not difficult to realize that all of us, ignorant or cultivated, are primarily interested in murder and love-making. The really extraordinary thing is that the most appalling fictions are not actually so popular as that literature which deals with the most undisputed and depressing facts. Men are not apparently so interested in murder and love-making as they are in the number of different forms of latchkey which exist in London or the time that it would take a grasshopper to jump from Cairo to the Cape. The enormous mass of fatuous and useless truth which fills the most widely-circulated papers, such as Tit-Bits, Science Siftings, and many of the illustrated magazines, is certainly one of the most extraordinary kinds of emotional and mental pabulum on which man ever fed. It is almost incredible that these preposterous statistics should actually be more popular than the most blood-curdling mysteries and the most luxurious debauches of sentiment. To imagine it is like imagining the humorous passages in Bradshaw's Railway Guide read aloud on winter evenings. It is like conceiving a man unable to put down an advertisement of Mother Seigel's Syrup because he wished to know what eventually happened to the young man who was extremely ill at Edinburgh. In the case of cheap detective stories and cheap novelettes, we can most of us feel, whatever our degree of education, that it might be possible to read them if we gave full indulgence to a lower and more facile part of our natures; at the worst we feel that we might enjoy them as we might enjoy bull-baiting or getting drunk. But the literature of information is absolutely mysterious to us. We can no more think of amusing ourselves with it than of reading whole pages of a Surbiton local directory. To read such things would not be a piece of vulgar indulgence; it would be a highly arduous and meritorious enterprise. It is this fact which constitutes a profound and almost unfathomable interest in this particular branch of popular literature.

Primarily, at least, there is one rather peculiar thing which must in justice be said about it. The readers of this strange science must be allowed to be, upon the whole, as disinterested as a prophet seeing visions or a child reading fairy-tales. Here, again, we find, as we so often do, that whatever view of this matter of popular literature we can trust, we can trust least of all the comment and censure current among the vulgar educated. The ordinary version of the ground of this popularity for information, which would be given by a person of greater cultivation, would be that common men are chiefly interested in those sordid facts that surround them on every side. A very small degree of examination will

show us that whatever ground there is for the popularity of these insane encyclopaedias, it cannot be the ground of utility. The version of life given by a penny novelette may be very moonstruck and unreliable, but it is at least more likely to contain facts relevant to daily life than compilations on the subject of the number of cows' tails that would reach the North Pole. There are many more people who are in love than there are people who have any intention of counting or collecting cows' tails. It is evident to me that the grounds of this widespread madness of information for information's sake must be sought in other and deeper parts of human nature than those daily needs which lie so near the surface that even social philosophers have discovered them somewhere in that profound and eternal instinct for enthusiasm and minding other people's business which made great popular movements like the Crusades or the Gordon Riots.

I once had the pleasure of knowing a man who actually talked in private life after the manner of these papers. His conversation consisted of fragmentary statements about height and weight and depth and time and population, and his conversation was a nightmare of dullness. During the shortest pause he would ask whether his interlocutors were aware how many tons of rust were scraped every year off the Menai Bridge, and how many rival shops Mr. Whiteley had bought up since he opened his business. The attitude of his acquaintances towards this inexhaustible entertainer varied according to his presence or absence between indifference and terror. It was frightful to think of a man's brain being stocked with such inexpressibly profitless treasures. It was like visiting some imposing British Museum and finding its galleries and glass cases filled with specimens of London mud, of common mortar, of broken walking-sticks and cheap tobacco. Years afterwards I discovered that this intolerable prosaic bore had been, in fact, a poet. I learnt that every item of this multitudinous information was totally and unblushingly untrue, that for all I knew he had made it up as he went along; that no tons of rust are scraped off the Menai Bridge, and that the rival tradesmen and Mr. Whiteley were creatures of the poet's brain. Instantly I conceived consuming respect for the man who was so circumstantial, so monotonous, so entirely purposeless a liar. With him it must have been a case of art for art's sake. The joke sustained so gravely through a respected lifetime was of that order of joke which is shared with omniscience. But what struck me more cogently upon reflection was the fact that these immeasurable trivialities, which had struck me as utterly vulgar and arid when I thought they were true, immediately became picturesque and almost brilliant when I thought they were inventions of the human fancy. And here, as it seems to me, I laid my finger upon a fundamental quality of the cultivated class which prevents it, and will, perhaps, always prevent it from seeing with the eyes of popular imagination. The merely educated can scarcely ever be brought to believe that this world is itself an interesting place. When they look at a work of art, good or bad, they expect to be

interested, but when they look at a newspaper advertisement or a group in the street, they do not, properly and literally speaking, expect to be interested. But to common and simple people this world is a work of art, though it is, like many great works of art, anonymous. They look to life for interest with the same kind of cheerful and uneradicable assurance with which we look for interest at a comedy for which we have paid money at the door. To the eyes of the ultimate school of contemporary fastidiousness, the universe is indeed an ill-drawn and over-coloured picture, the scrawlings in circles of a baby upon the slate of night; its starry skies are a vulgar pattern which they would not have for a wallpaper, its flowers and fruits have a cockney brilliancy, like the holiday hat of a flower-girl. Hence, degraded by art to its own level, they have lost altogether that primitive and typical taste of man--the taste for news. By this essential taste for news, I mean the pleasure in hearing the mere fact that a man has died at the age of 110 in South Wales, or that the horses ran away at a funeral in San Francisco. Large masses of the early faiths and politics of the world, numbers of the miracles and heroic anecdotes, are based primarily upon this love of something that has just happened, this divine institution of gossip. When Christianity was named the good news, it spread rapidly, not only because it was good, but also because it was news. So it is that if any of us have ever spoken to a navy in a train about the daily paper, we have generally found the navy interested, not in those struggles of Parliaments and trades unions which sometimes are, and are always supposed to be, for his benefit; but in the fact that an unusually large whale has been washed up on the coast of Orkney, or that some leading millionaire like Mr. Harmsworth is reported to break a hundred pipes a year. The educated classes, cloyed and demoralized with the mere indulgence of art and mood, can no longer understand the idle and splendid disinterestedness of the reader of Pearson's Weekly. He still keeps something of that feeling which should be the birthright of men--the feeling that this planet is like a new house into which we have just moved our baggage. Any detail of it has a value, and, with a truly sportsmanlike instinct, the average man takes most pleasure in the details which are most complicated, irrelevant, and at once difficult and useless to discover. Those parts of the newspaper which announce the giant gooseberry and the raining frogs are really the modern representatives of the popular tendency which produced the hydra and the werewolf and the dog-headed men. Folk in the Middle Ages were not interested in a dragon or a glimpse of the devil because they thought that it was a beautiful prose idyll, but because they thought that it had really just been seen. It was not like so much artistic literature, a refuge indicating the dulness of the world: it was an incident pointedly illustrating the fecund poetry of the world.

That much can be said, and is said, against the literature of information, I do not for a moment deny. It is shapeless, it is trivial, it may give an unreal air of knowledge, it unquestionably lies along with the rest of popular literature under the general indictment that it may spoil the chance of better work, certainly by

wasting time, possibly by ruining taste. But these obvious objections are the objections which we hear so persistently from everyone that one cannot help wondering where the papers in question procure their myriads of readers. The natural necessity and natural good underlying such crude institutions is far less often a subject of speculation; yet the healthy hungers which lie at the back of the habits of modern democracy are surely worthy of the same sympathetic study that we give to the dogmas of the fanatics long dethroned and the intrigues of commonwealths long obliterated from the earth. And this is the base and consideration which I have to offer: that perhaps the taste for shreds and patches of journalistic science and history is not, as is continually asserted, the vulgar and senile curiosity of a people that has grown old, but simply the babyish and indiscriminate curiosity of a people still young and entering history for the first time. In other words, I suggest that they only tell each other in magazines the same kind of stories of commonplace portents and conventional eccentricities which, in any case, they would tell each other in taverns. Science itself is only the exaggeration and specialization of this thirst for useless fact, which is the mark of the youth of man. But science has become strangely separated from the mere news and scandal of flowers and birds; men have ceased to see that a pterodactyl was as fresh and natural as a flower, that a flower is as monstrous as a pterodactyl. The rebuilding of this bridge between science and human nature is one of the greatest needs of mankind. We have all to show that before we go on to any visions or creations we can be contented with a planet of miracles.