

1945 - Good Bad Books

GOOD BAD BOOKS

Not long ago a publisher commissioned me to write an introduction for a reprint of a novel by Leonard Merrick. This publishing house, it appears, is going to reissue a long series of minor and partly-forgotten novels of the twentieth century. It is a valuable service in these bookless days, and I rather envy the person whose job it will be to scout round the threepenny boxes, hunting down copies of his boyhood favourites.

A type of book which we hardly seem to produce in these days, but which flowered with great richness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is what Chesterton called the "good bad book": that is, the kind of book that has no literary pretensions but which remains readable when more serious productions have perished. Obviously outstanding books in this line are RAFFLES and the Sherlock Holmes stories, which have kept their place when innumerable "problem novels", "human documents" and "terrible indictments" of this or that have fallen into deserved oblivion. (Who has worn better, Conan Doyle or Meredith?) Almost in the same class as these I, put R. Austin Freeman's earlier stories--"The Singing Bone" "The Eye of Osiris" and others--Ernest Bramah's MAX CARRADOS, and, dropping the standard a bit, Guy Boothby's Tibetan thriller, DR NIKOLA, a sort of schoolboy version of Hue's TRAVELS IN TARTARY, which would probably make a real visit to Central Asia seem a dismal anticlimax.

But apart from thrillers, there were the minor humorous writers of the period. For example, Pett Ridge-but I admit his full-length books no longer seem readable--E. Nesbit (THE TREASURE SEEKERS), George Birmingham, who was good so long as he kept off politics, the pornographic Binstead ("Pitcher" of the PINK 'UN), and, if American books can be included, Booth Tarkington's Penrod stories. A cut above most of these was Barry Pain. Some of Pain's humorous writings are, I suppose, still in print, but to anyone who comes across it I recommend what must now be a very rare book--THE OCTAVE OF CLAUDIUS, a brilliant exercise in the macabre. Somewhat later in time there was Peter Blundell, who wrote in the W.W. Jacobs vein about Far Eastern seaport towns, and who seems to be rather unaccountably forgotten, in spite of having been praised in print by H.G. Wells.

However, all the books I have been speaking of are frankly "escape" literature. They form pleasant patches in one's memory, quiet corners where the mind can browse at odd moments, but they hardly pretend to have anything to do with real life. There is another kind of good bad book which is more seriously intended, and which tells us, I think, something about the nature of the novel and the reasons for its present decadence. During the last fifty years there has been a whole series of writers--some of them are still writing--whom it is quite impossible to call "good" by any strictly literary standard, but who are natural novelists and who seem to attain sincerity partly because they are not inhibited by good taste. In this class I put Leonard Merrick himself, W.L. George, J.D. Beresford, Ernest Raymond, May Sinclair, and--at a lower level than the others but still essentially similar--A.S.M. Hutchinson.

Most of these have been prolific writers, and their output has naturally varied in quality. I am thinking in each case of one or two outstanding books: for example, Merrick's CYNTHIA, J.D. Beresford's A CANDIDATE FOR TRUTH, W.L. George's CALIBAN, May Sinclair's THE COMBINED MAZE and Ernest Raymond's WE, THE ACCUSED. In each of these books the author has been able to identify himself with his imagined characters, to feel with them and invite sympathy on their behalf. with a kind of abandonment that cleverer people would find it difficult to achieve. They bring out the

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fact that intellectual refinement can be a disadvantage to a story-teller, as it would be to a music-hall comedian.

Take, for example, Ernest Raymond's *WE, THE ACCUSED*--a peculiarly sordid and convincing murder story, probably based on the Crippen case. I think it gains a great deal from the fact that the author only partly grasps the pathetic vulgarity of the people he is writing about, and therefore does not despise them. Perhaps it even--like Theodore Dreiser's *AMERICAN TRAGEDY*--gains something from the clumsy long-winded manner in which it is written; detail is piled on detail, with almost no attempt at selection, and in the process an effect of terrible, grinding cruelty is slowly built up. So also with *A CANDIDATE FOR TRUTH*. Here there is not the same clumsiness, but there is the same ability to take seriously the problems of commonplace people. So also with *CYNTHIA* and at any rate the earlier part of *Caliban*. The greater part of what W.L. George wrote was shoddy rubbish, but in this particular book, based on the career of Northcliffe, he achieved some memorable and truthful pictures of lower-middle-class London life. Parts of this book are probably autobiographical, and one of the advantages of good bad writers is their lack of shame in writing autobiography. Exhibitionism and self-pity are the bane of the novelist, and yet if he is too frightened of them his creative gift may suffer.

The existence of good bad literature--the fact that one can be amused or excited or even moved by a book that one's intellect simply refuses to take seriously--is a reminder that art is not the same thing as cerebration. I imagine that by any test that could be devised, Carlyle would be found to be a more intelligent man than Trollope. Yet Trollope has remained readable and Carlyle has not: with all his cleverness he had not even the wit to write in plain straightforward English. In novelists, almost as much as in poets, the connection between intelligence and creative power is hard to establish. A good novelist may be a prodigy of self-discipline like Flaubert, or he may be an intellectual sprawl like Dickens. Enough talent to set up dozens of ordinary writers has been poured into Wyndham Lewis's so-called novels, such as *TARR* or *SNOOTY BARONET*. Yet it would be a very heavy labour to read one of these books right through. Some indefinable quality, a sort of literary vitamin, which exists even in a book like *IF WINTER COMES*, is absent from them.

Perhaps the supreme example of the "good bad" book is *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*. It is an unintentionally ludicrous book, full of preposterous melodramatic incidents; it is also deeply moving and essentially true; it is hard to say which quality outweighs the other. But *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN*, after all, is trying to be serious and to deal with the real world. How about the frankly escapist writers, the purveyors of thrills and "light" humour? How about *SHERLOCK HOLMES*, *VICE VERSA*, *DRACULA*, *HELEN'S BABIES* or *KING SOLOMON'S MINES*? All of these are definitely absurd books, books which one is more inclined to laugh AT than WITH, and which were hardly taken seriously even by their authors; yet they have survived, and will probably continue to do so. All one can say is that, while civilisation remains such that one needs distraction from time to time, "light" literature has its appointed place; also that there is such a thing as sheer skill, or native grace, which may have more survival value than erudition or intellectual power. There are music-hall songs which are better poems than three-quarters of the stuff that gets into the anthologies:

Come where the booze is cheaper,
Come where the pots hold more,
Come where the boss is a bit of a sport,
Come to the pub next door!

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Or again:

Two lovely black eyes
Oh, what a surprise!
Only for calling another man wrong,
Two lovely black eyes!

I would far rather have written either of those than, say, "The Blessed Damozel" or "Love in the Valley". And by the same token I would back UNCLE TOM'S CABIN to outlive the complete works of Virginia Woolf or George Moore, though I know of no strictly literary test which would show where the superiority lies.