

V A N I T Y F A I R

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The Super-Novelists

*Suggestions for a League for
the Restraint of Popular Authors*

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Colored by
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H. G. Wells has of late—under thin disguise as a fiction writer—been writing tracts dealing with such light fiction material as education, socialism and the life hereafter. The question is “Ought a man to pose as a novelist when he is, in reality, a super-schoolmaster?”

THE question before the house is, What about the novelist? That is to say, what are we—the people who pay for his bread and butter and gasoline—going to allow him to get away with? Or, putting it a little differently, which is the boss, the novelist or the public? It is a question that needs instant attention, for every day the tendency of the novelist to get above himself grows greater.

This is what we get for feeding them meat.

NOVELISTS may be divided into two classes. There is the ordinary novelist, the straightforward, horny-handed dealer in narrative, who is perfectly content to turn out his two books a year, on the understanding—a gentleman's agreement between himself and his public—that he reserves movie rights and is allowed an occasional photograph in the papers of himself and his pet dog. This class gives no trouble at all.

Complications arise when we come to the other class, the super-novelists, of which species the Messrs. H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett may be taken as the best examples. Are these men, on the strength of having entertained us in the past, to be permitted to run our lives for us?

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The trouble with the super-novelist is that he won't stay put. He refuses to remain labelled. And it is absolute pain to the public not to be able to label anybody. I read James Braid's "Advanced Golf" with pleasure and interest, in what might be called a reverent and prayerful spirit. What would be my feelings if some enterprising publisher suddenly shot at me James Braid's "God, the Invisible King"? I should feel defrauded. And it is this fraud that the super-novelists are perpetrating all the time.

Arnold Bennett is a particularly bad example. He began by writing stories about women with Titian colored hair being found in pools of blood on the doormat. None of his characters ever went to bed; they spent the night listening to one other give low, sinister whistles or watching one other climb into windows with masks on. They handled revolvers with the careless ease with which the ordinary man handles an umbrella. I put Arnold Bennett on my list of reliable authors, and had my order in for "Clayhanger" directly it was announced among Forthcoming Novels. I can still remember skimming its pages for the corpse, and my disappointment when the only character who died did it in his bed after about four hundred pages of preparation.

And then, just as I had reluctantly accepted this new manner of his, he started writing tracts.

[I]t was just the same with H. G. Wells. Nothing was actually promised; there was no formal contract. But I was distinctly under the impression that, when I parted with my dollar fifty for a book with the Wells label, I was to receive in exchange at least one chunk of illicit love; and I am bound to admit that for quite a while the man played fair. But to-day, if you buy a Wells, you are likely to get a treatise on a new religion or an inquiry into whether the public schools of England really educate.

The novelist makes out a case for himself. He says, in effect, "I am a brainy devil. This has been proved by the fact that my books have sold like hot cakes. The time has now come for me to discard the jam and give the public the pill without any trimmings. A novelist is a thinker. Why should he not be permitted to think? And, if he is permitted to think, why should he not print his thoughts?"

The argument is speciously sound, but it leaves out of account the fact that he is really obtaining money under false pretenses. He says to the public by suggestion: "Here's a little thing I've just done called 'Should Religion Be Religious?' Get it early before the rush." And, if the public hesitates, he says, "Well, please yourself. But don't forget how you liked my 'Mystery of the Man with the Missing Toe' and my 'Girl Who Shouldn't Have Done It.'"

"Oh, it's in the style of those, is it?" says the public, brightening up and reaching for its purse. "The title rather misled me for a moment."

"Well, I wrote it, didn't I?" says the novelist. "I can't say fairer than that. It isn't a slavish imitation of my previous successes, of

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course, but still you know me, Al."

And the public, digging down into its jeans, discovers too late that it has been handed a citron.

This is all wrong, and there should be some way of preventing it. Sometimes even the titles are deliberately misleading. Arnold Bennett publishes a thing called "The Human Machine", and you think that he has at last returned to his early manner and is going to give you a hummer, full of dead bodies with hideous gashes all over them, and cries in the night, and so forth. The title practically tells the story, which, of course, will be a sort of modern Frankenstein: and the Human Machine will be a ghastly creation of some mad inventor, rather like the thing in "The Ape, The Idiot, and Other People", which has a brass ball instead of a head and went about the place strangling people. So you tumble over your feet in your hurry to get to the book-seller's, and, when you get home and unwrap your purchase, you find it is merely a few hints on how to be happy though living, and the most exciting thing in it is the bit where the author recommends you always to keep a diary.

MEN in other professions don't do this sort of thing. When you go to see Fred Stone, he does not pause in the act of falling backwards off a ladder to tell you that the time has come when the Golden Rule must be recognized as the guiding principle of life, or to give you a list of the books you should buy if you wish to form your literary taste. A hundred times he has been tempted to do it, but always a consideration for a public which has paid its money to see him in his familiar feats restrains him.

Similarly, your favorite after-dinner speaker, whose reputation is founded on an inimitable delivery of the lighter form of anecdote, seldom chills his audience by saying, "I am reminded, by a remark of the toast-master's, of a little story of an Irishman. It seems that this Irishman was walking down Broadway one day, and, just as he reached Forty-second Street, he was struck by the thought that the idea of God is one that has always been implanted in however rudimentary a form in the mind of Man."

If other people can hold themselves in, why not novelists?

Part of the trouble is due to the fact that editors and publishers tempt these poor fellows. They offer them substantial cheques for their views on this subject and that, little realizing that they are helping to form a habit which, once acquired, is seldom cured without the extreme of discomfort and inconvenience. I have known quite blameless novelists, who never dreamed of expressing their opinions except through the mouths of their characters, start with gleaming eyes to pour out reams of the purest drivel simply because some editor has written to them, offering them a high rate per word for their comments on some public happening. It is always the same sad story. They

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tell you that just one expression of opinion won't hurt them, or that they can take it or leave it alone; but—

the end is inevitable. Once they have got the taste for it, novelists seem to lose all their finer feelings, and go in for an orgy of didactic utterance. If they are to be saved from themselves, the public must do it.

I WOULD suggest some form of league for the restraint of novelists. A little unselfish getting-together of the public could easily effect this. If novelists knew that there was in existence a society of thousands of readers, prepared to boycott them for a term of years in the event of their publishing any form of book that was not a work of fiction, they would soon mend their ways. They would have to be carefully watched, of course, especially the more hardened cases like Mr. Wells, to see that they did not sneak their tracts into the body of their new novel. The Society would have to be prepared to deal firmly with a writer who,—in the middle, let us say, of a scene showing the husband confronting the guilty wife—inserted some such passage as this:

“‘Woman,’ said Reginald, coldly, ‘what have you to say?’ She faced him proudly and defiantly. Never, he thought with a pang, had he known her so beautiful, so alluring. ‘What have I to say?’ she repeated. Her eyes flashed. ‘Only this, Reginald, that, while we are on this subject, I should like to say a few words about the training of performing seals for vaudeville. Under the term “seals” are usually grouped two very widely different types of animals, the so-called seals and the hair seals or true seals. The former are not properly seals at all, but are allied rather to the bear family.’ Reginald shook with an emotion he could scarce suppress. ‘Go on,’ he said in a low voice. ‘Tell me more . . . ,’”

We should have to be very sharp on that sort of thing.