

I CAN READ ANYTHING!

All Right—Then Read This.

By Daniel A. Lord S.J.

WITH the deft skill of a magician covering a trick rabbit—or let's say, with the nonchalance of a tramp placing his foot on a stray but conspicuous half-dollar—Dick slipped a magazine over the book on the sun-porch table.

Quite as nonchalantly, and with equal cleverness, Father Hall picked up the magazine, looked at it with elaborate inattention, and then laid it aside to pick up the book. Dick, meanwhile, was deep in a wicker chair, busily snapping, extinguishing and snapping again his cigarette lighter. Dick patently was not quite at ease.

Father Hall flipped the pages of the book, pausing momentarily on certain paragraphs that arrested his eye. Then, without looking up, he asked guilelessly:

“Did one of your friends forget and leave this book here?”

Dick slowly lighted a cigarette.

“I'm reading it myself,” he answered honestly.

“Oh!” was Father Hall's only comment as he turned a few more pages. “The author certainly knew his asterisks, didn't he? And I never saw more of those wicked little successions of periods ending paragraphs and interrupting chapters.”

Spicy Stuff.

Dick was silent; so Father Hall flipped the pages.

He must have read very rapidly or else turned the pages with scarcely more than a glance at the paragraphs. Once or twice he seemed to read more slowly, and Dick looked up at him nervously and furtively.

Finally, after a painful silence that seemed to Dick endless, the priest closed the book and held it gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

Dick squirmed uneasily but said nothing. In silence Father Hall sought another chair, sat down, and gingerly laid the book on the floor beside him.

“That book, Dick,” he commented, quizzically, “is what I may be pardoned for calling ‘hot stuff.’”

Dick glanced away resentfully.

“Well,” he said, “it isn't exactly Sunday-school pap, but it's modern and brilliant and smart, and everybody is talking about it and reading it.”

“I'm not reading it,” Father Hall said, mildly.

Nothing Hurts Me.

“Besides,” Dick went on, “I can read anything. Nothing hurts me.”

“‘Nothing hurts me,’” mused Father Hall, “as Socrates might have said when he drank the hemlock.”

The door giving upon the sun porch opened, and Sue, Dick's eighteen-year-old twin, stood smiling at them. But her smile faded at sight of the two solemn figures in the wicker chairs.

“What's the matter?” she demanded. “Somebody dead, or have stocks fallen again?”

Dick smoked silently, but Father Hall held up the book.

“Dick and I are talking literature,” he said. “By the way, Sue, did you read this?”

Sue looked momentarily embarrassed, but then she lifted her head just a little defiantly.

“Yes, I read it. Everyone is reading it. One is just out of the conversation if one hasn't read it.”

“I see,” said Father Hall.

“Of course you're shocked, Father,” she hurried on. “But please don't worry about Dick and me. I can read anything, and so can he. Nothing hurts me.”

Father Hall smiled.

“As Cleopatra might have remarked when she laid the asp against her breast.”

Taboo Subject.

He put the book on the floor beside him once more.

“Have you a few minutes?” he asked. “I d like it a lot if you and Dick would tell me about books. Probably I’m an old fogey. Probably I don’t get your attitude. I frankly don’t think that I can read everything. I know that all sorts of books would hurt me. But you’ve got a point of view, and I’d like to get it. May I?”

Nobody that knew Father Hall could possibly doubt either his broadminded tolerance of youth or his love for the Bradley twins. Least of all could the twins themselves doubt either fact. There was nothing they’d hesitate to talk over with Father Hall, who had known them from their cradles, and there was no opinion which they sincerely held that he had ever failed to understand.

But, for some reason, they had lately been shy about telling him of their reading. What one twin read the other read, too. Recently, they had been browsing far afield through a variety of new and popular books,. fiction, biography, some poetry, and a bit of history. And, though they knew the books they read were much talked of, by some tacit agreement they had kept several of these books out of their recent conversations with the friendly priest.

They knew him to be a voracious and discriminating reader. His taste was famously good, and his own novels had a literary flavour about them that made them a joy to every genuine lover of style.

Now they were unexpectedly called upon to explain their attitude toward reading and to defend their glib “I can read anything.” They hesitated, naturally. One thing gave them confidence—the assurance that any fair defence would meet with the priest’s honest approval and sympathetic understanding.

Modern Always.

Sue curled herself up in the corner of the lounge and pulled her slippered feet under her.

“Let the man do the talking,” she volunteered.

Dick glared, threw his cigarette away, lighted another in an evident attempt to gain time to gather his forces, and then leaned forward.

“I know you don’t get our point of view,” he began defensively.

“No?” asked Father Hall, just a little hurt. “I’ve got it on other things, and I’ll try this time, too.”

Sue flared up. “Of course you will. Dick, stop being personal and absurd, and state our case.”

“Sorry.” Dick was really penitent. “I know you always get us. I was just clumsy and heavy-handed. Well, let’s put it this way: We live In a very modern world, a world that is alive and rapidly changing. One has to know that world, and books are one important means of knowing it. Clever modern books are the record of our times, and we owe it to ourselves to keep abreast of that record.”

“Right,” seconded Sue. “And the record is certainly brilliant, clever, and powerfully amusing.”

“Dick said something like that before you came in,” Father Hall said, nodding. “I suppose it is a record even if sometimes it is a sad one and often a lying one. Go on.”

“Oh, yes, I know,” Dick agreed. “A lot of it is junk; some is off-colour and a great deal isn’t true. But I only read for the story, just for the pure enjoyment.”

Father Hall raised his eyebrows slightly and thoughtfully picked up the book.

“Mightn’t it be wiser to say just ‘enjoyment’ without the adjective,” he asked, quietly.

Dick was momentarily embarrassed, but hurried on.

Meet the World.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll drop the pure. Still I’m not sure that a lot of it is as impure as it is supposed to be. It’s life,

and we have a right and duty to know life. We can't very well all shut ourselves up in nice, safe monasteries utterly ignorant of the world in its pleasant and unpleasant aspects. I've no way of learning about...well let's say, about pirates, except from books. Books introduce me to South Sea Islanders and French guardsmen and Italian brigands, to jockeys and bankers and pugilists and sailors and steelworkers and hoboes and—.-."

"Atheists, scoffers at religion and decency, prostitutes and adulterers," Father Hall suggested helpfully.

"Well, all right; them, too," Dick shot back. "But they are part of life, aren't they? Sue and I are just babies if we can't face the fact that unpleasant people exist."

"It's one thing to have them exist and another to admit them into our minds, there to parade their indecencies, to defend with clever tongues their ribaldries, to mock our faith and flout our God," said Father Hall.

"That isn't what Dick means," Sue protested. "He means that part of the charm and power of modern literature is that it faces life frankly and honestly. If there are unpleasant people, it isn't afraid to introduce them. It isn't ashamed of the facts. And why should anyone be afraid of frankness and honesty? Anything else is just mid—Victorian."

Poor Victorians.

"That is a terrible thing to say," smiled Father Hall. "It's rather terrible to remember how little those Victorians knew about life. Dickens, for example, and his utter ignorance of the poor; Thackeray and Browning, Newman and Manning, Gladstone, George Eliot, Darwin, the actor Booth and Chinese Gordon, Don Bosco and the Cure d' Ars. Poor Victorians! How ignorant they were of life, and how pitifully timid!"

"Don't overwhelm us," Sue cried protestingly.

But Dick was not to be stopped.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I love honesty. We of the younger generation all do. And it's honest to face and see life even in literature."

"Besides," Sue added, "to the pure all things are pure."

Father Hall sat up suddenly.

"Even when the author has a dirty mind and means to write a dirty story? My dear, please don't say that. It's like saying, 'To the well there is no such fact in the world as sickness'; or, 'To the wise there is no such thing as stupidity and folly'; or, 'To the sinless Christ there was no such fact as serious sin.'"

"But, Father," Dick went on, "books have no real effect on one's life. We read a book and promptly forget it. It's just the fun of the story that holds us or the enjoyment of someone's cleverness. Books have no real connection with our lives. They slide over the surface of our minds and have no effect on what we do or think."

"Dick's right," Sue agreed. "I'm sure I never did a thing or thought a thing just because I happened to read it in a book."

Nobody Believes Advertisements

"What a fearful blow that is to national advertisers," Father Hall sighed. "Those poor chaps (I almost said saps) have been labouring under the foolish delusion that people will buy autos and cigarettes and face powders and soaps and socks because they've read the advertisements in the magazines. And it seems that what we read has no effect on us whatsoever"

"Not fair," Dick protested. "I mean that just because I happened to read 'Macbeth' I don't promptly go out and murder somebody."

"And I," chimed in Sue, "don't run away with somebody's perfectly good husband just because I happened to read . . . er . . .er..."

Father Hall held up his hand.

"Never mind, Sue. You don't need to tell me what you've been reading. But before we get away from that point, Dick, let me remind you that after 'Macbeth' you wouldn't commit murder because Shakespeare has brilliantly proved the terrible consequences of a crime like that. But suppose that he had set out to prove that murder was quite justified under

certain conditions; and suppose that later in your life those conditions were realised in your case. What then?"

"And Sue, if the book you happen to be talking about is a clever defence of a young lady's running away with somebody's husband, I'm not at all sure that some of its readers won't later think this quite the correct thing to do. Yes, and do it. I've known cases where they have. But I'm interrupting again. Tell me: Would you read a book that you knew was against your faith and feel sure that it would not hurt you?"

Two Sides.

Dick and Sue interchanged a swift look. They clearly had read such books. Father Hall graciously and tactfully ignored their tell—tale glance.

"Well—" , Sue hesitated.

"I would," Dick replied honestly. "I feel it is only fair to see both sides of a question. Besides, I know my faith well enough to defend it against any book."

"Clever boy," said Father Hall, though not a trace of irony was in his voice.

Sue leaped to her twin's defence.

"I must admit that I've read books against the Church. But they seemed plain silly to me. Often I didn't understand them at all

"Thank God for that," interjected the priest.

"Sometimes I didn't know the answers to the difficulties; but I just made an act of faith, and I know they didn't hurt me."

"I pray God," said Father Hall, looking very serious, "that they didn't. Sometimes one isn't sure and can't be sure until long years after."

"Anyhow," Dick shot out, still intent on his own defence, "the stuff is smart, fascinating, attractive, and—"

"Therefore just that much more perilous," Father Hall added.

The twins stopped. Father Hall looked up from his pipe, which he had been tamping with a practised little finger.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"That about states the case as I see it," Dick answered.

"Then, if I may summarise," the priest said, "the case goes like this: One must either keep up with the latest and best books or just be out of touch with one's times; these authors are brilliant and most entertaining and one reads them only for entertainment and because of their delightful style; a knowledge of life is something that every honest man and woman should have and must have, and that knowledge can be gained from books; these books are honest and face life squarely; books never have any real effect on life or conduct or belief, but pass over the surface of the mind; since to the pure all things are pure, a dirty book does not harm a pure-minded person; and since you are well-instructed Catholics, you are sure you have at your finger-tips the answers to attacks on your faith, though you feel it your duty to see both sides of the question even there. Have I put the case correctly?"

"Absolutely," the twins agreed, beaming.

"Then may I talk?"

"We want you to," they chorused.

A New Slant on Books.

Father Hall settled back in his chair. He had refilled his pipe and paused long enough to blow a great cloud of smoke into the air.

"It was left for this generation," he began, "to discover the astounding fact that books have no effect on life or conduct. Every other age in history was sure that books were one of the really powerful forces that drive ideas into the very soul of mankind, foment revolutions, fire national conflagrations, start new religions, corrupt human hearts, sweep kings off their thrones, and set men on the way to heaven or to hell."

“Oh!” ejaculated Sue, wide-eyed.

“But nowadays the younger generation has discovered that all this is poppycock. Books have no effect on men or nations.”

“Frankly, this is just a little hard to square with history. We see Aristophanes laughing Grecian abuses out of existence. We see Cervantes, with ‘Don Quixote,’ driving the lance into a decadent chivalry. ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ fanned the flames of national hatred so high that Lincoln could say to its author: ‘So this is the little lady who started this big war.’ We see Dickens furiously writing, his novels in the confident expectation that they would wipe out the abuses of brutal boarding schools and of poorhouses and chancery courts. Charles Reade, with ‘Hard Cash,’ dynamited the private insane asylums of England, and Sinclair’s ‘The Jungle’ caused our Senate to order an investigation and clean-up of the packing industry.

“Men have somehow felt that books do matter. Without ‘Science and Health’ how far would Christian Science have gone? Without ‘The Intimate Story of a Soul’ we might never have heard of the Little Flower. I rather fancy that ‘The Following of Christ’ has had some slight effect on mankind for good and few would say that the ‘Decameron hasn’t polluted at least one human mind. And don’t you think that history gives rather an important place to books like the Bible, the Koran, the Vedas?”

“But—”, Dick began to interrupt.

History Proves.

“Not quite through yet, Dick,” Father Hall objected. “If books have no effect on lives, then I’ve badly misread history. As I remember it, about every great movement since the invention of the printing press has been swept along on a tide of books.

“Luther preached. But he accomplished the largest part of his work when he learned to use the relatively new printing press to flood all Germany with his translations, his tracts, his pamphlets and books. Men read and were, by his powerful German, his coarse wit, his ruthless invective, swept away, out of the Church of their fathers into the Church he had founded.

“Voltaire inundated France with his writings. His books and pamphlets assailed the nobility and attacked the Church so ruthlessly and viciously that the Revolution was inevitable. Rousseau and the Encyclopaedists followed his lead and wrote, wrote, wrote. Men read, believed, grew furious with wrath, built the guillotine decapitated the king of France, and drove the Church into bloody exile.

“For three centuries and more English Protestants believed the most absurd nonsense about the Church simply because history had been written that way. The books painted the Church as a horrible monster which had enslaved England, put chains on free English minds, and retarded the progress of the kingdom.

“All the while, ignored and unknown, were the facts that these books carefully forgot to mention: that England’s best-loved heroes were all Catholic—Arthur, Alfred, Edward the Confessor, Richard the Lionhearted, Henry V., Chaucer, the Cabots; that Catholics, under a Cardinal’s lead, had won the basic Magna Charta; that every great Anglican cathedral had been built by Catholic hands for Catholic worship; that English law and government were Catholic in origin and essentials; that English universities were the creation of the hated Popes, that Catholic mediaeval England was the true Merrie England.

Lies and Caesar.

“Books had built up a perfect hedge of lies around the honest facts of history. Then Scott, with his books, began to show Catholic England and Scotland as the brave, gay, chivalrous lands they were, and the Oxford Movement began. And we know quite well what part was played in that movement by the books of those pioneering converts.”

“Interesting enough, Julius Caesar, long before printing or modern publicity departments were dreamed of, wrote his Commentaries to make himself popular in Rome. Sounds incredible, doesn’t it, after the way you wrestled with the Gallic War in high school? But it’s true, and he succeeded.

“Milton wrote pamphlets to fight and overthrow what he thought the tyranny of the existing government. The Italian revolution of the last century was heralded and accompanied by a perfect army of books. Why, without books—”

“Yes,” interrupted Dick, “but that is all rather ancient history. In modern times----“

Nowadays.

“Human nature hasn’t changed essentially in the past twenty years, Dick. But let’s take a look at our times.

“I dare say not a dozen people still living remember listening to the lectures of Darwin and Huxley. But their books have carried thousands of our contemporaries into their theories. Karl Marx seems to have been rather a retiring chap; it was his book, ‘Capital; read and re-read, that upset whole nations of Europe, established powerful political parties in every civilised nation, and erected on the ruins of the Czarist throne a nation of Soviets.

“George Bernard Shaw emphatically refuses to come to America and lecture. He doesn’t need to. His books (not his presented but his published plays and his prefaces) are working far more powerfully and extensively than he possibly could.

“Where does all this talk about a ‘new morality’ originate; all this ferment over free love and divorce and sex freedom and companionate marriage? From the books of Ibsen, Havelock, Ellis, and Ellen Key, and latterly from those of Ben Lindsey, Bertrand Russell and, among the ordinary people, from the stories of the incredible Elinor Glyn. For one person who has ever heard these people lecture a thousand have read and been influenced by their books.”

“Who is ever going to estimate the harm done by a book like that of Maria Monk? Because of her lies, thousands of people shrink from the sight of a nun. How was the terrible anti-Catholic campaign carried on? Through books, pamphlets, magazines, reaching and affecting whole sections of the country.”

Books and Belief.

“But, Father,” protested Dick, “anyone who would believe that sort of stuff is just too ignorant to be considered. We’re not in that class, surely.”

“Wait a minute,” Father Hall retorted, “Except for Maria Monk, Elinor Glyn, and the anti-Catholic bigotry stuff, practically all the rest is making its appeal to the cultured and educated. But let’s take your own class, the educated group to which you belong.

“You’re not too young to have heard of the systematic attack on religion called Modernism. Modernism set out to blast the whole ground from under faith, destroy the supernatural, and reduce to the level of folklore all religious belief; it meant to take God out of religion and to substitute on His altars humanity. In no time Modernism had wrecked whole sections of the Protestant Churches and turned them from faiths into social agencies.

“And books were the most powerful force of Modernism. Renan and Loisy and Harnack and Tyrrell wrote, were read, and people became Modernists without knowing it.”

“Fraser’s ‘The Golden Bough’ and James’ ‘The Will to Believe’ tore down the faith of thousands. The published attacks on the Bible seared the faith of other thousands. Many of these attacks have died a speedy death as newly-discovered documents and monuments proved them stupid and worthless, but the original books go on with their devastating work.

“And the doubts and difficulties of the modernistic pioneers poured down to the ordinary people through the novels of people like Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Sinclair Lewis, through the pseudo-historical stuff of Dorm Byrne and Elmer Davis and the pernicious pages of the Sunday supplements.

“No one will ever know how many people gave up their faith in Christ after reading Renan or Strauss, or how many gave up orthodox Christianity after reading one of the imitators of Loisy, or decided the Bible was largely myth after a few hours with Harnack and his group. And believe me, these authors knew this would happen and meant it to happen.

Bullets v. Books.

“Surely you’ve heard the word ‘propaganda.’ Propaganda is just clever advertising, largely through literature. During

the late war each nation employed large groups of men to write glorious things about the home country and terrible things about the enemy. And the people of each nation read and believed. Literature was as deadly a weapon as any long-range gun, and one of the big battles of the war was fought between the writers of the nations.

“So, to break the morale of the German troops, D’Annunzio adopted a much more subtle weapon than bombs or starvation. He flew over the enemy’s lines and dropped pamphlets among the soldiers, pamphlets that hit at their courage, stressed the power of the forces leagued against them, stirred them up against their leaders, and made them feel that their cause was hopeless and already lost. No wonder the German commanders feared him more than any Allied ace coming in the latest of battle ‘planes’.”

“Nations are so deeply experienced in the power of a single book that some of the militaristic nations immediately banned ‘All Quiet on the Western Front.’ They know the effect that book might easily have on the soldiers under arms and the citizens who pay for those arms”

Personally

“But it seems to me,” Dick objected, “that most of the books you’ve talked about affect nations rather than individuals. And most of them concern faith, not morals. We are talking chiefly about indecent books, as we call them, and their effect upon individuals.”

“We’re talking about the general proposition you laid down, that books have no effect on life; and at least half these authors deal with morals, not faith. However, it’s much easier to handle your objection. After all, nations are made up of individuals. The nation has no beliefs and no movements except those that its citizens give it. So, wherever I have said nations, you can, if you wish, substitute individuals.”

“But let’s look at these books against morals. A brilliant editor in one of our mid-western cities fell away from the Church, married after his divorce, and died suddenly without priest or Sacraments. In a gathering shortly before his death he said: ‘Yes, I’ve been living rather wildly; and, do you know, my start on the down grade began when an older man lent me the unexpurgated edition of “The Arabian Nights”?’

“I’m going to talk a lot more about this subject later. But just let me ask you what effect you think the rotten Roman novels had on the men and women who read them? They laughed, they approved, and we have history to show what they did by way of imitation.”

“The Renaissance novels were simply an attempt to put back into popular circulation the rediscovered vices of pagan days. They succeeded admirably. One group of French novels has become a very byword for schools of sin, and one writer’s name has been definitely and for all time fastened to the sin on which his book riveted attention.”

“Every nation has had its undercurrent of filthy literature that never reached the public market. But it did reach the public morals, to sadden humanity and spoil lives.

From Immoral Heroes.

“And all this popular jargon, these catch-phrases of modern immorality, are taken right out of the heart of popular sellers. ‘Morality is just a matter of individual conscience,’ says the modern young lady to me, and I know that she caught the phrase from the lips of a dozen heroes and heroines of books she’s been reading.

“‘A pure woman and a chaste woman are not necessarily the same’; ‘There is no such thing as pure and impure; the only standard of goodness is happiness’; ‘A pure woman may be one who follows her inclinations and gives herself freely outside of marriage’; ‘Virtue is a sign of weakness, not of strength.’ These are all catch-phrases that I’ve heard again and again in talking with people. Where did they get them? From books. Why, they’re the theses of a dozen popular novels this minute, and are taken for granted in another score.

“People learn new principles of immorality and new defences from the lips of their favourite heroes and heroines and from the pens of anti-moral authors.”

“I don’t take my morals or my beliefs or anything else from the mouth of any character in a book,” protested Dick

fiercely.

“And I certainly don’t think that I do,” Sue agreed.

“No?” said Father Hall. “Then I’m afraid you’re very different from the rest of us. I know very well that I do. About two-thirds of my opinions and ideas I got straight out of books. And they weren’t always the right opinions to have.

Duelling a la Dumas.

“When I was a little chap, I happened to have the run of a neighbour’s library. He wasn’t a Catholic, but he was a real book-lover, and his library was a youngster’s paradise. Early in my browsing I discovered Dumas. No one had told me that his books, except ‘The Count of Monte Cristo, were on the Index; so I read voraciously.”

“The Index!” snorted Dick. “Why in the world should Dumas be on the Index?”

“Precisely what I asked,” Father Hall agreed. “Well, I went to college and finally reached senior year, still feeling that way. Then in ethics class our professor announced the thesis: ‘Duelling is a form of murder and is forbidden by the natural law.’ I flared into a fury. It was nothing of the sort; it was brave, fine, and often absolutely essential. One had a right to defend his honour. A man who did not was a coward. For two days the professor and I had it hot and heavy, and finally it dawned on me I hadn’t a leg to stand on. So I withdrew ignominiously but resentfully.

“Then I sat me down to think why duelling had always seemed so splendid a thing to me. In a flash I had it. I had fallen in love with D’Artagnan and the Three Musketeers. I had seen them, because of an inadvertent flick of an enemy’s cloak, draw their rapiers and have at him. I had watched them drive back the Cardinal’s men and spit them on swords. And whatever my beloved heroes did was right and must be right. Unconsciously, I had drunk in a belief in duelling by watching a fictional character fight his duels.”

“Oh,” protested Sue, “but duelling is so out of fashion!”

“Quite right.”

Father Hall got up, walked across the room, ran his finger over the titles on the bookshelf, and turned with a book in his hand.

Two Crimes.

“‘Justice,’ by Galsworthy,” he read, and then looked up. “Either of you read it?”

“I did,” answered Sue.

“Like it?” asked Father Hall.

Sue hesitated a moment and then spoke the truth.

“I loved it. Of course, the title is ironical. He meant it to be called ‘Injustice.’ Those two poor people caught in that terrible web . . . I never felt sorrier for anyone in my life than for them.”

Father Hall replaced the book and walked back to his chair.

“It’s quite a while since I read it,” he said, “so I may be a little inaccurate. Correct me if I tell the story wrong.

“A young woman is badly treated by a brute of a husband. A young chap falls in love with her, justified, of course, by the fact that her husband is such a scoundrel. They plan to run away from her home. Unfortunately the young man has no money. So he steals it from a trusting employer and runs away with the married woman. They are caught, and he is sent to jail. So this poor chap, for the unimportant crimes of adultery and theft— though perhaps I should say for the delightful virtues of free love and communal property—is cruelly, callously, villainously sent to gaol in a travesty of justice.”

“Oh,” said Sue, in a rather small voice, “I never thought of it that way.”

“Precisely,” Father Hall agreed. “It never occurred to you that the author had made you, through an appeal to your emotions, forgive and condone two terrible sins and condemn the State for punishing them. But, Sue, what you saw were an attractive hero and an abused heroine. Between them and their happiness lay the Sixth and the Seventh Commandments and the laws of a nation. But you loved the hero and the heroine, and in your eagerness for their happiness the abstract question of law and duty and principle seemed mighty unimportant. You thought only of the people and forgot all about

the laws that safeguard personal property and the future of the human race.

“That is just where a skilfully-written novel or play is so powerful. It puts into the mouth of a charming person a philosophy of life. The philosophy may be bad; the morality may be awful. But they come warm and appealing from the lips of a man or a woman who wins our hearts. Then the characters begin to live by those principles, and in our sympathy for the persons we forget the morality involved. They could do anything and we would forgive them. Sin doesn't seem sin when it is committed by charming people. We start by loving the sinners and end by denying that what they do is sin.

“That seems terribly exaggerated,” Dick said.

Murder Condoned.

“Yes? Perhaps you remember a bestseller in which the subordinate hero deliberately puts his father to death to save him from further suffering. Incidentally, this chap has been living with a girl to whom he is not married, justifying their union on the grounds of their love. In another book of about the same period the hero stabs his sleeping mistress because he fears she may fall into a life of shame.”

“Now, both those characters were so attractive and their arguments were so warm and appealing that scarcely a person turned from the books without wondering if the two cold-blooded murders were not quite justified. As for the fact that both of the men were living in frank sin, I never heard a reader comment on that.”

“That was precisely what the authors meant to be the effect on their readers, and it was.”

“I remember one of those books,” Sue agreed, “and I'll admit that I wondered at the time about the justice of that murder.”

“Yes, it was cleverly and subtly done. But what about the books that are not meant to be subtle, but are direct and brutal attacks on faith and morality? Do you mean to tell me you don't think they affect people?”

“Why—” , hesitated Dick.

Dumb or Hardboiled

“If they don't,” Father Hall went on, “one of these things is true (you'll have to forgive me if I'm brutal): Either you are cleverer and better informed than the author; you are too calloused to be affected (hardboiled, if you prefer); or you are too stupid and dull to know what the author is talking about or to take in his arguments.”

“That is cruel,” Sue pouted.

“But absolutely true. I'd hate to say I was so clever and well informed that I could answer all difficulties raised against my faith or moral code. Trained as I am through my priestly education. I know I couldn't. Hardly a month passes without some new difficulty for which, at the time, I have no answer. Some day an answer is found and the difficulty disappears, as all of them do; but, at the time, I can meet the difficulty only with an act of faith.”

“But what happens to a person who has no special training? The writer who presents the difficulties puts them forward with a cocky assurance staggering to one who is not acquainted with the fate of all difficulties against faith. The reader answers the difficulties either with a blind act of faith or with the troubles of a disturbed mind. In either case he has faced a difficulty to which he sees no answer, and an unanswered difficulty can develop into a real peril to faith.”

I Know the Answer.

“Believe me, every priest meets in the course of a year a dozen young people who were sure they could answer all the difficulties they might meet, but who speedily ‘read themselves out of the Church.’ The most brilliant young chap in the college I attended read himself out of his faith within one year after he finished school. The tragedy of it is that most of the things he thought to be difficulties have crumbled and been swept away by time. He is still a rudderless unbeliever.”

“You remember the sensation caused a few years ago by Will Durant's ‘Story of Philosophy.’ What the general public did not know was that Will Durant, thoroughgoing agnostic though he is, was a Catholic college graduate. Systematically, though for a long time unconsciously, he read away his faith. No doubt, he was quite sure at the beginning that he knew

the answer to every difficulty that could arise. Wasn't he a man with a Catholic college training? Yet, within a matter of months, he was tortured by doubts, then stripped of belief, and finally was left utterly without faith in anything supernatural."

"But mustn't we see the two sides to every question?" Dick demanded.

"The Catholic Church is extraordinarily fair to both sides of any question. When a student of Catholic philosophy or theology studies any controverted point, he sees all the important objections raised against it. He gives the objectors full right to state their difficulties and complete their case."

"But I've noticed, Dick, that most of those who talk loudly about seeing the two sides of a question usually are willing to look at only one—the side against their faith. They begin quite sure that they will look up the Catholic side, but I seldom find them doing it. On the contrary, again and again they let the first difficulty floor them. They begin by saying they must hear two sides; they end by hearing only one."

Clever Adversaries

"Catholic books on any important subject will give you both sides of the question with admirable frankness. Anti-religious books give you only the difficulties, and, knowingly or unknowingly, when they do try to state the Catholic position, they state it unfairly and falsely.

"Has it occurred to you that, when you read books of this sort, you pit your minds, as yet not fully matured or trained, against the trained, clever, brilliant minds of men skilled in their lines and adept in their methods?"

"And when they are utterly unscrupulous, as, let us say, Joseph McCabe is, and will twist any bit of history to make a case, and pile yarn on yarn to construct a proof, and use fable for fact and supposition for solid argument, what chance has the average reader against them? He is fighting men who don't fight fairly, and we wisely decline to meet an unfair fighter."

"Yet, I know one popular publishing firm that floods the country with booklets, and it no more hesitates about its methods than a common gangster. It is just a gang of literary pirates, scuttling the ship of faith, flying a Jolly Roger, willing to use any sort of weapon, false history, twisted fact, plain lies, to beat down faith and break down morality. What a fool any man is who puts his mind in the power of ruthless brigands like that, who hate the faith and Christian morality so intensely that they stop at nothing if only they can thrust a poisoned dagger home!"

The Flag of Shame

Father Hall had let his voice rise slightly, for his hatred of this lawless trifling with truth was deep and intense. Now he leaned back in his chair more calm.

"It is perfectly true," he went on, "that people may become so hardened that books concerned with sex immorality leave them largely unaffected. Men may get inoculated with poison to such an extent that they can take fair quantities of it without dying. But their immunity is in itself a sign there is something wrong with them.

"So there are sin-soaked people in the world (they are a sad, sad group) on whom all the filthiest stories seem to have no effect. They have seen everything terrible and heard everything vile, and they have lost, in consequence, man's precious gift of shame. Without a flicker of embarrassment they listen to the dirtiest story and repeat unblushingly one to match it. We know there are such people, but who of us wants to be classed with them?"

"There are certain things that should, in the course of nature, cause any normal person a blush or at least a feeling of shame. That is simply nature's danger signal, its red flag of warning. There is nothing surely very fine about admitting that one has grown so hardened that all sense of shame and decent reticence has slipped away."

"Please, Father," protested Sue, "we're not as callous as that. At least, I hope not."

Astonishing Ignorance.

"Then you are wrong in saying that nothing harms you, unless . . . well, unless I'm going to be forced to call you dumb.

You're not. Yet there are readers so thickheaded that they never really know what the author means. He may be hammering away at their faith. He may be presenting the vilest things before their so-called imaginations. They read blissfully on as unharmed as if they were turning the pages of a seed catalogue."

"Of course, that sort of people are saved by an astonishing ignorance. They read terrible books and yawn unintelligently. They go through a devastating book against faith or morals, and the arguments fall back from their concrete, reinforced concrete, minds. Nothing bothers them any more than it would bother a baby or an idiot."

"Ouch!" cried Dick. "Have a heart! We're not quite in that class."

"No," Father Hall agreed, "I will compliment you by thinking that you're not. But if you really understand some of the things that are appearing in popular books to-day, and still insist they don't hurt you..."

"Well, quite recently, a girl I know read one of the late popular novels. It's a sad thing, the story of unnatural, sinful love between women."

Father Hall intercepted another quick look between the twins. They had recognised the book even from his very sketchy description. Perhaps they had read it. He hoped not.

"This girl has always had one of the sweetest, freshest minds I have ever known—a mind that Our Lady must love. Throughout her life her greatest ideal has been an aunt a gracious, stately woman, fine in character and noble in conduct. The girl lived in the hope of being like this elder woman.

"Well, she read this book, learned for the first time of this unnatural love, and began a sad introspection. Suddenly, she seemed to see this lovely ideal she had built up around her aunt as a manifestation of something terribly wrong. Worried, she came to me with her trouble. That devilish book had been able to take a sweet, pure mind and fill it full of wretched questions about something that was the splendid ideal of her life."

"You see, it's just sheer nonsense to say, 'To the pure all things are pure.' There are filthy things in the world and every honest man and woman knows they are filthy. All the arguing of seven shrewd sophists won't make them clean."

How to Treat the Rotter?

"Dick, what do you do when a fellow in your company tells a rotten story?"

"If I don't know him very well, I walk away. If he's somebody I know, I tell him to shut his face."

"Why don't you blissfully fold your hands and say, 'I don't see anything wrong in that story; I've got a pure mind'?"

"I see," said Dick, subdued.

"And just because you happen to think that Sue has a sweet, clean mind, do you let that sort of filthy stuff be told in her presence? Logically, if 'to the pure all things are pure,' it wouldn't do her any harm. But you don't act on that silly principle when some rotter starts to wag his dirty tongue."

"Does it make you feel just a little hot under the collar when somebody makes slurring remarks about your faith?"

"Rather," said Dick, warmly.

"Then, why is it that any sort of story or any sort of attack put between the covers of a two-fifty book is quite all right? Michael Arlen, of more or less unhappy memory (he had a brief vogue, thank heaven!), or the foul-minded author of 'The Arabian Nights' is privileged to write anything. Joseph McCabe and Haldeman-Julius may sneer at and lie about your beautiful faith—provided they do it at a comfortable profit."

"It isn't logical. If a dirty story or an attack on your faith is something you resent in conversation, why do you think it quite all right to swallow it in a book?"

Like Unclean Thoughts

"But let's go a step farther. If an impure thought or a doubt against faith enters your mind, what have you been taught to do?"

"Say a little prayer and try to banish it," Sue answered promptly.

"Then why does a Catholic feel free to admit such a thought just because it comes from the smudged and dirty or

cynically ignorant pages of a book? Dirt is dirt whether it is written by Boccaccio or James Joyce or Cabell, and all the smug hypocrisy in the world will never make it anything but dirt. And a sneer at faith is just as much a sneer when it comes from a page as from a smelly soap-box orator.

“We turn from a dirty picture or tear it up. We refuse the doubt entrance to our souls. Yet we admit into our minds people who spatter our purity with filth and who spit upon our crucifix.”

“Nothing hurts you? Why, the sort of book we are talking about was meant to hurt you. Deliberately, it sets itself to foul your mind, to make you love sin, to kill your faith in God, to breed in your soul treachery to your faith. And the men who write this sort are clever as the devil and quite as filled with hatred against your soul. You play with their books and you play with the most virulent poison. Only the grace of God in miraculous quantities will keep them from slaying your soul as I have seen them slay the souls of scores.”

Dishonest

“Then, Father, you don’t think these are justified by their frankness and honesty?” asked Dick.

“I’m not so decidedly sure of their honesty,” said Father Hall. “These sex-saturated books are certainly not honest, and are certainly badly out of line with the facts. They make sex the centre of all, source of all happiness, the dominating principle of all lives. They are as untruthful and misleading as is any form of exclusive concentration—concentration on sickness or money or pleasure or anything else.”

These sex-mad heroines and sex-dominated heroes are just abnormalities and are as far from wholesome human life as abnormalities always are.”

“But I don’t find anything very honest in books which deliberately ignore the great facts and experiences of life. A man who pretends that God isn’t necessary is just intellectually dishonest. He shuts his eyes to the facts and then says they aren’t there. A man who contradicts the whole experience of humankind regarding sin and its consequences, who argues himself out of conscience and morality and common decency, who laughs at good women as if they were contemptible, and lauds bad women as if they were splendid creatures, is not being honest. He’s as Intellectually crooked as the old sophists proving that two and two made five, and that no arrow shot from a bow could ever reach its target. It isn’t honest to put forth a philosophy that would turn men into beasts, as Bertrand Russell does, or to advocate immoral theories in a book and then live personally like a Puritan, as George Bernard Shaw does.”

Seeing Death

“And I’ve noticed these very honest authors shifting their positions a dozen times in a lifetime, and each time declaring they have the only and absolute truth. They haven’t honesty enough ever to mention the fact that they have gone back on themselves and changed their first principles. Each time they are infallible, but, dishonestly, they never admit that they know they were wrong.”

“But what about knowing life?” Dick urged.

“What sort of life, Dick?” Father Hall asked. “I’m not sure that in most cases it is life at all. I think it is death, the death of the soul by mortal sin. It is the death of purity and innocence, and it is the death of faith and loyalty to Christ. It is the slaying of souls, the killing or deadening of the very finest and best instincts of our nature. Knowing life, I’m afraid that it’s often the fetid breath of vampires upon our throats.”

“There are all sorts of things in life that we deliberately shun. We do not invite lepers into our parlours. We segregate contagious diseases. We know that some things must be known by doctors of which we are blissfully ignorant. We are content that the sins of mankind be poured into the ears of a priest. We do not envy him that side of the confessional.”

Read the Best

“So with literature. There are certain things that do not belong in decent literature. They are subjects for the specialist—the doctor, the priest, the sociologist. We are better off without knowing them, just as our life is richer if we

are spared personal contact with gangsters and prostitutes. You'll notice, by the way, that most of these characters you meet in the literature that 'shows you life' are the failures, outcasts, the sad and horrible wrecks, either in body or soul, of the world. They are not those who make life richer, but those who rob life of its richness."

They were silent for a moment Then Sue spoke up.

"It's going to be hard not to keep up with the times."

Father Hall knitted his brow.

"Why give it up? I don't remember saying that that was necessary," he said. "Did I advocate your being out of date or intellectually passé? I've always felt it my duty to be decently well read and well informed. I try to keep abreast of most modern thought and events. Yet I do it without touching anything that is smutty and few things that are against my faith."

"There is so much worthwhile stuff published that I don't have a chance to read the junk and the filth. I'm behind in my reading all the time, try as I may to keep abreast. Yet, I never knowingly admit a suggestive book to my library, and where I read things that are anti-Catholic, I do it because I have a duty to know in order to refute."

"You see, we all have only a limited amount of time that we can give to reading. In consequence, we all have to pick and choose most carefully. So why should I read all the best sellers unless there is something of real value in them? Most popular books are forgotten twelve months after they are published. And most anti-Catholic books are out of date before they are half a year off the press."

"I read, love reading, fill every leisure moment with it, and yet I can stay away very comfortably from the kind of thing we are discussing. I've read the outstanding new books of the past years as I keep adding to my reading knowledge of the classics. I haven't time to bother with sex nonsense, with trash, or with books that soil my mind and slander my faith."

Father Hall leaned down and picked up the offending book.

Bonfire

"This book," he said, "is the product of a filthy mind determined to spread its filth. I happen to know that the author lives as he writes—in frank immorality. He would love nothing better than to spoil your young, pure minds. He envies you the innocence he himself has lost. He hates the Church because it coolly, logically, courageously brands his sin with its real name and threatens him with the wrath of God and the ultimate rejection by all decent-minded men, So he comes to you with his false smile and his brilliant cleverness, bent on ruining you if he can. Please, for your own souls' sake, shut the doors of your mind in his face and send him back to his filth, where he belongs."

Mrs. Bradley came out on the sun porch and found it empty. Then she looked out over the lawn and started.

There in the centre of the lawn, around a bare flower bed waiting for the soon-to-be spring planting, stood Father Hall and the twins.

"Great stars!" she said to herself. "Either I'm mad or they are. Fancy three almost grown-up people standing solemnly warming their hands at a tiny little bonfire like that."

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