

THE LITERARY DIGEST

January 13, 1906

A HUMORIST'S PLEA FOR SERIOUS READING.

WHY do we read?" asks Mr. Jerome K. Jerome, the well known English humorist; and he goes on to express regretfully the belief that a goodly proportion of modern reading is prompted by a desire not to think. He cites the case of a friend of his, a rather voracious reader, of whom he asked, "How many hours per annum do you reckon you waste reading rubbish?" Here is the answer: "I get through, I suppose, two and a half hours' reading a day. History, of which I am fond, an occasional taste of poetry, and say half a dozen new novels a year that are worth the reading account for perhaps the odd thirty minutes. For the other two hours I have to fall back on the rubbish." When Mr. Jerome remarked virtuously that the result was, "roughly speaking, a month of waking hours a year wasted out of a short and uncertain existence," his friend replied, "When you don't want to think, you light a pipe. I open a book. It comes to the same thing." This attitude toward reading, laments Mr. Jerome, is very largely typical. "Our ancestors brewed themselves the bowl of punch; we subscribe to the circulating library." Although Mr. Jerome's paper, which appears in *The Woman's Home Companion* (January) begins in his usual whimsical manner, it develops into an earnest plea for serious reading and serious writing. To quote further:

"Books have become the modern narcotic. China has adopted the opium habit for want of fiction. When China obtains each week her 'Greatest Novel of the Century,' her 'Most Thrilling Story of the Year,' her 'Best Selling Book of the Season,' the opium den will be no more needed. As in the case of my friend previously referred to, a man addicted to novel reading is not as a rule much of a smoker or drinker. This may be the better for his body, but about his mind I am not so sure.

"The young girl forbidden the saloon and café muddles her brain with books instead of with drink. From the twenty to fifty new novels a year that she reads it is doubtful if she obtains a single new idea, a single thought worth remembering. She reads not to think, but to save herself the trouble of thinking. The book that could give her any real knowledge of life would not perhaps be found on shelves of the circulating library. She reads, one after another, a monotonous procession of love stories, where impossible young men with nothing else to do in life make impossible love to impossibly perfect young women."

Our forebears, says Mr. Jerome, read not to avoid the trouble of thinking, but rather to enjoy the pleasure of thinking. In this connection we read:

"The Elizabethan dramatists demanded that their audiences should think with them. We tolerate Shakespeare to-day only on condition that the poetry shall be hidden as much as possible behind the scenery. The play, 'Everyman,' for instance, was not the type of entertainment a business man would seek in order to forget his troubles. . . . It is a curious development of later times, this demand of literature that she shall be a crooning nurse, whose business it is to rock us to sleep. . . .

"In Russia to-day, where life is still a serious matter, not yet all money-making and money-spending, the author is still regarded as the preacher, the leader: his works are criticized, not because of their phraseology, but because of the thought they contain, the help they give to men and women faced with the fierce problem of life."

Literature, Mr. Jerome claims, is essentially an appeal to the intellect, not to the emotions. Hence books, "to be of any use, any enjoyment even," must demand thought. He states that of all the books of Stevenson's that he has read and enjoyed, "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" is the only one that lingers with him. Of them all, it is the one that "made me to think 'furiously,' as the

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French would say." According to Mr. Jerome, the author as well as the reader is a sufferer under present conditions. He says:

"What I fear is that with the millions now coming into the reading world, who before sought their amusement elsewhere, the real book will be swamped. At present the most that an author can do is to write nine books that the public is willing to read, in the hope that as a reward his publishers will allow him to write one that he wants to write, and that a few hundreds here and there may enjoy reading. The very young man and woman do, I believe, read to think. They stand on the threshold of life, the road stretches in front of them unknown and mysterious. They seize upon books in the hope of learning something to satisfy



JEROME K. JEROME,

An English humorist who pleads for the serious intention in literature. He says: "The canting talk about 'art for art's sake' will have to be forgotten. You cannot divorce literature from life. A man or woman who talks alone and in confidence to the young in their tens of thousands is not entitled to say to himself, 'I take no responsibility for these thoughts I am whispering in your ear.'"

their natural curiosity. It is unfortunate that the great mass of printed matter is only going to mislead them—give them utterly false ideas. . . .

"For this is the true work of literature—that it shall hold a mirror up to Nature—that it shall show us life, the hidden emotions, the hidden passions. Literature, if it is going to be of any use at all to future generations, will have to be taken more seriously. The canting talk about 'art for art's sake' will have to be forgotten. An author exercises too much influence upon his readers, especially upon his youthful readers, to be able to shirk responsibility. You might as well talk about 'patent medicine for patent medicine's sake.' A book either does good or it does harm. You cannot divorce literature from life. A man or woman who talks alone and in confidence to the young in their tens of thousands is not entitled to say to himself, 'I take no responsibility for these thoughts I am whispering into your ear.'"

Mr. Jerome concludes with the plea that "occasionally we should be allowed to read and write the book that is neither a 'spellbinder' nor 'a soothing syrup,' but merely a serious contribution to human thought."