

passed his philanthropic bill; he might have reminded the millions, whose eyes he had opened to the titillation of print, that there was some thing hidden in books besides sensation and eavesdropping. But he said not a word; he only leapt with an insane joy upon the scandal and triviality provided for his inferiors; and his joy was shared by the hardy Conservative, who had opposed the bill, and who, without the boon of universal education, might never have known how Lord Tom Noddy wore his whiskers at twenty five, or what was the fashion of Miss Evelina Jones's frock, when eighteen years had written their legend upon that gifted actress's face. In brief, a fresh set of books and periodicals had been contrived for those who merely read "by Act of Parliament," and it was eagerly seized upon by the miracles of erudition and refinement who had hitherto solaced their leisure with serious reviews and ponderous histories.

The vice was there already, though it lacked opportunity; the hunger for vulgarity merely pined for want of sustenance. But no sooner was sustenance given it than the hunger grew voraciously, and to day there are few men who will ever glut their appetite for what is mean and trivial. The taste, then, which should have been levelled up has been levelled down; the School Board has imposed its fancy upon the whole community; the man, in fact, has told the master what to read, and the master has generally obeyed with a sad alacrity. Thus a spurious alloy has ousted the purer metals. Thus the literary currency has been debased.

Time was when reading was a leisured and scholarly pursuit, when the business man carried with him to the country such books as were not merely designed to annihilate the brain. In these brave days the classics were still remembered, and a skilfully

edited Greek play might be rewarded by a bishopric. A century ago we find Charles Fox reading Porson's "Orestes" and "Hecuba," on the recommendation of the wicked Grafton, and declaring that "this is the sort of reading I now take most delight in." Turn to the "Memoirs" of Charles Greville, and you will see that, man about town as he was, he yet knew how to read, and to choose the best. The records of Messrs. Blackwood and Murray, again, reveal to us a world which not long since passed away, a world which professed a sincere interest in such literature as was not ephemeral, and which was content to wait one month, or even three, for a political commentary. That an article in the *Quarterly* should shake a Ministry seems incredible to this generation, which despises the fourth edition of an evening paper, when the extra special lies hot-pressed upon the counter. Where, moreover, shall you match Mr. Gladstone, who, being neither scholar nor man of letters, was yet a lover of books and a loyal student? He, at any rate, was not always content with the hasty success of the moment, and even in the midst of a political crisis he could so fully detach himself from affairs as to speculate upon Homer or to divide the straws of theological controversy. But to-day the cheap novel is sufficient to beguile the "cultured" brain, which has cheerfully sunk to the level ordained for it by the majority.

So we are assailed upon all sides by books which are no books—by the novel, which follows the fashion of the hour, and which will be forgotten as soon as it has passed through the mill of the Circulating Library. It is curious, indeed, to note how easily the art of fiction, once practised for its own sake, has settled down to supply the popular demand. If theology be demanded, a dozen samples are on the counter at once; if the unravelling