

(2) On another point I must explain myself in greater detail. I refer to the reading of sceptical books. If a clergyman were simply to warn people against the reading of such books, he might be accused of wishing to hide from people the arguments which might be brought against the doctrines which he taught. If, on the other hand, he recommended the reading of them, he might properly doubt whether he had a right to expose young or inexperienced or half-taught people to influences which he believed to be evil, and which they might have no power to resist. What should we think of the man who taunted us by saying we were afraid of the strength of our constitution because we refused to expose ourselves to the contagion or infection of disease?

Let me say then that for some persons it is quite lawful to read books which assail our most sacred convictions; with some—perhaps not a great number—it may be a duty to acquaint themselves with the literature of unbelief, so that they may be prepared to counsel and help those who may be assailed by doubt. But for the great majority of readers we may say, without hesitation, that it is better for them to abstain from such books; and this for one simple reason, to say nothing of any others, that it is impossible for the majority of readers to do such reading thoroughly and effectually. This is certainly a case in which we may say, with Pope (*Essay on Criticism* ii. 15):

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.

If these words savour of religious bigotry, then I will quote a writer who is liable to no such suspicion, I mean M. Renan, who is himself an unbeliever in the supernatural character of Christianity: "There are very few persons," says M. Renan, "who have a right to disbelieve Christi-

anity." He means, of course, that there are very few people who are either competent to examine the grounds of belief and unbelief, or who will be able to abandon the Gospel and stand without its support. And if this is true, it will be better for such persons to leave infidel books alone.

(3) But there is another class of books which are hardly less demoralizing than those which we have already noticed. I refer to those rubbishy publications, badly written, with no high moral aim, dealing in a very cheap and vulgar style of wit, which seem to be written with the express purpose of lowering and corrupting the taste, of destroying every serious conception of life, of turning every subject into a kind of ghastly fun. Surely Carlyle was right when he said, "If these are the books which we are handling, we had better have nothing to do with books at all."

While preparing this lecture I got hold of a report of an interesting and amusing article in the English *Daily News* of January 30th, on English and American humourists. Commenting on Mr. Howell's recent expression on the same subject, the *News* says:

"We cannot do Mr. Howells the injustice of supposing that he is one of those enormously-cultivated persons who can read Tolstoi but cannot read Shakespeare. As humour is usually understood, Shakespeare is a master here as everywhere, and if Mr. Howells prefers that 'amoosin little cus,' Artemus Ward's kangaroo, to Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff, the controversy is at an end. Nobody can seriously argue with a gentleman who thinks the 'Innocents Abroad' humorous, and Bottom the Weaver, and Launce, void of humour." The *News* continues in a bantering strain to confront Josh Billings with Dan Chaucer, Uncle Remus with Burns, Charles Dudley Warner with Sydney