THE LITERARY CLINIC

By Joseph Collins

II

As to moral imbeciles in fiction

THE characters in novels that the average reader greets with keenest pleasure are the virtuous ones. When their deeds are prompted by bravery and their conduct displays the possession of most of the cardinal and some of the theological virtues, they become the reader's heroes. He seldom fails to identify himself with them; he basks in their glory as though he were somehow responsible for it; he applauds their successes, revels in their accomplishments, abets their efforts and laments their misfortunes. Villains in novels are rarely liked, unless they repent before the last chapter and, curbing their tendencies to evil, perform heroic deeds which achieve salvation. Next to self identification, the reader likes to identify the virtuous characters in a book with someone he loves, or to take them as prototypes of someone he would be willing to love. Girls have dreamed of the happiness of having a Cid Campeador for a husband, men have lost their hearts to Beatrices and Juliets, and a boy who had not wished, at some time of his life, to be David Copperfield would be as rare as a little girl who never dreamed she was one of Dr. March's daughters.

Judging, however, from some recent fiction, the heretofore approved hero of novels is being replaced by a central figure which, though not virtuous in the conventional sense of the word, absorbs the interest and reflects the action of the story. This new type of hero fascinates by his lack of virtues; often he has no sense of morality and still less of justice and beauty. He goes through life seeking and seldom failing to find power, riches, comfort; and in his selfish endeavor he takes what he can from God, man, and state without remorse or pang or fear, without even a remote feeling that he may be wronging others.

One of the most conspicuous of these characters in modern fiction is Rabevel, the hero of Lucien Fabre. M. Fabre politely diagnoses his case as the disease of ardency, but others call it moral imbecility. Rabevel, a child of accident, displayed his infirmity from his youngest years; he broke all the commandments, and was ready to invent others that he might have the satisfaction of breaking them. He did things that transcend imagination, he reveled in the sordidity of his instinct, and never received punishment. In reality, he became one of the richest and most powerful captains of industry of the country, took part in her political affairs, gained the respect of those who knew him little, and kept in awe friends who feared his venge-

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ance. Rabevel went through a long life, filled with important events, as unaware of his monstrousness as a dog who has stolen a piece of meat is until he has been taught better. The difference is that the dog learns from experience. Rabevel did not. He had had his chance — he had nearly devoted his life to the service of the Church and had so amended his conduct while at school that his family and teachers were reasonably sure that good example and study had turned young Rabevel into a human being. But the conversion lasted exactly ten hours after he left school. From that time to the end of his life, he felt and quenched an insatiable thirst for the mysteries and glory of a world that lay always a little beyond, and that could be reached only by theft, treason, treachery, assault, and murder. This desire for the Never Never Land of Peter Pan, a land where Rabevel would be king and the world his slave, increased with the years and became a veritable mania. Rabevel had what is commonly called "spring fret", but with him it was confined to no special season; it blossomed perennially. Could he have followed the sun on its westward voyage to obtain an increase of wordly possessions, he would have done so. Rabevel was as incapable of a voluntary decent action as Saint Francis of Assisi was incapable of cruelty; the little good he did was forced upon him, and eventually led to his own fulfilment.

What strikes the occidentalist as moral imbecility to the nth degree is frequently seen in recent Russian literature; the modern Russian reconciles immorality and virtue in a way that transcends the comprehension of his western neighbors. It would be easy to enumerate many such writers, but the most important of them is Leonid Andreyev, who died five years ago in his forty eighth year and upon whose work posterity seems to be setting the stamp of approval. Andreyev has portrayed a sort of moral imbecile in "Judas Iscariot and the Others"; he succeeds in convincing us that the traitor who is ugly, a liar and a thief, is superior to the twelve faithful disciples. But his best depiction is in "Thought", where we see Dr. Kerzhentsev triumph over all obstacles and commit unspeakable crimes with a mathematical precision which excludes all conscience.

Heroines whose conspicuous possession is moral insensibility, amounting often to moral imbecility, have always been fiction favorites. Becky Sharp, for instance, and Hedda Gabler. But it remained for a German to depict a feminine moral monstrosity. Mandragore was first conceived in the mind of a decadent young man when he heard of the origin and supposed power of a little branch of tree called a mandragore which was kept as a talisman in a family he visited. In the most vulgar, obscene, and blasphemous fashion, in as nearly as possible the same manner as the original mandragore was produced, he brought about the existence of a real girl, Mandragore. He succeeded admirably in his task. Mandragore was beautiful, strangely so, with an unaccountable magic power over all human beings; she was the personification of the spirit of evil, and made the world a hell for those who approached her. She killed one after another the men who loved her. And despite her premeditated and impulsive crimes, she enslaved hearts to the chariot of her life. But in order to give ample measure of comfort and food for the sentimentality and morbidness of his countrymen, Hanns Heinz Ewers does

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not hesitate to transform her into a less repellent monster when real love comes to her.

Rabevel has a spiritual sister in an American girl of fiction, Minnie Defoe, the heroine of Elisabeth Sanxay Holding's "Invincible Minnie". But the two characters are presented in contrasting manner. Rabevel is not depicted as a moral imbecile, whereas Minnie is. The origin and bringing up of the two were different, and most of all their object in life. Rabevel had to depend upon himself for success and knew it; Minnie was reasonably sure that life would take care of her. Rabevel never concealed the fact that his sole interest in life was his own satisfaction and comfort, while Minnie deluded herself — at least she convinced everyone else — that she was inspired exclusively by charitable motives. This fundamental difference between the two serves to show the important distinction between the Gallic and the Anglo-Saxon. Minnie's career was hectic and carefully planned. She had neither beauty nor passion, neither brains nor understanding, whereas her sister had all of them; yet she succeeded in conveying the impression that she was the superior one and she planned her life accordingly. She robbed Frances of her freedom; she compelled the man who loved her sister to marry herself; she lied and cheated, she was a bigamist and a thief; she ruined the life of Frances after depriving her of everything that made it worth living; she broke the heart of the man who had loved her. And through it all she retained her self respect and, more than all, she won the sympathy of the community. Although we cannot feel sorry for Minnie, since we see through her all the time, we can easily understand why those who lived with her were fooled. She was an absolute moral imbecile with a degree of religion and the veneer of civilization.

"Invincible Minnie" passed without causing more than a ripple four years ago when it was published. The public was not interested by that type of degenerate. Yet recent events have proved that public interest is aroused by persons of this sort when they thrust themselves into the limelight of real life.

Disagreeable as it may be, the fact remains that the characters we have been discussing are close to reality. Rabevel, though he lacks convincing qualities at the end of the book, nevertheless has an appearance of truth which makes him the spiritual relative of men we have met in real life. That such men as Rabevel do exist, or rather would exist if the law did not stifle their endeavors toward fulfilment before they are allowed to do much harm to the community, no one will dispute. "Mandragore", despite its mistakes and unwholesome atmosphere and descriptions, reveals a systematically perverted intelligence which, though in no way in keeping with the literary taste of our race, is nevertheless interesting from the standpoint of moral imbecility.

It may make for our enlightenment to reflect upon that which we call moral imbecility. When we say that an individual is an intellectual imbecile we feel reasonably sure that our auditors will know just what we mean; such is not the case when we say an individual is a moral imbecile.

I speak of moral imbecility as if it were an infirmity or possession whose existence everyone admits. It must at once be said that it is not recognized by the law. Though I do not propose here to draw the dividing line between morality and immorality, there is no

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doubt that it exists as a pathological manifestation of imbalance. Before any attempt can be made at defining it, the meaning the world puts on the word "morality" must be agreed upon. A man is more or less moral according to the measure in which he accepts and observes the commandments, and he is an example of morality if he adds to these the precept that Christ offered as the greatest of all commandments, after loving God: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The person who follows blindly the teachings of Christ, the man who obeys the commandments with the love of his neighbor in his heart, is said to be moral. A sense of morality thus understood, a sense of justice, of love, of honesty and of the other qualities that form the moral capital of an individual, may or may not be latent in the heart of men, but it is the object of bringing up and education to develop it, be the parent Jew or Gentile, theist or atheist, royalist or socialist. Those who are born without such endowment, those who form the living examples for a Rabevel or a Mandragore, are said to be moral imbeciles. They are incapable of distinguishing and choosing between good and evil, virtue and vice, and the native principle of moral sense is so entirely lacking in their makeup that they may be regarded as monsters.

The present seems to be a proper time to launch a campaign with the object of instructing the public as to what sanity and morality are. The fact that neither exists, that neither can be defined, should not deter us. Indeed we might do well to admit that the genus homo is born unmoral, that he has morality thrust upon him while he is awaiting the endowment that will permit him to judge for himself. When sapiency comes, he realizes that not only the short but the safe road to his goal — happiness — bears the legend "Morality Street". So he is moral, or approximately so. It pays to be moral. It not only pays the individual, but it pays the public. From earliest months it is borne in upon the child by word and example that he must forego gratification of desire, or delay it, in order that he or others may receive a greater but more distant advantage. When sentiency and discretion come to him, he realizes that the main difference between morality and immorality is the postponing and foregoing of immediate gratification. If he cannot effect this, he is bound to fall into the clutches of the law, and when he does — if he has the intelligence to know the difference between right and wrong, to realize the nature and consequence of his actions — he should be punished, for he is the most dangerous of all criminals. The very fabric of our punitive system is woven from what may be called moral fibre or tissue. If we cease to punish crimes that are founded in such complete immorality as to constitute moral imbecility, we must cease to punish at all. The perniciousness of such characters as Rabevel in literature is that they escape the law; their cleverness engenders resourcefulness and wealth, the two qualities that are most elusive of the law and permit them to keep out of its clutches or else facilitate them in escaping should they fall into the hands of the law.

In real life, this is not usually what happens, but something equally pernicious often occurs: an atmosphere of sentiment is generated which is prejudicial to punishment. At the present time, this atmosphere would seem to emanate more or less from a mysterious gland or glands. As a matter of fact, physicians do not know all that they desire to know about the therapeutic

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properties of the extracts of these glands; indeed there is still a great deal to learn of their physiology. Yet our ignorance does not justify the mystery that is made of the ductless glands, or of their potency in shaping character or warping the emotions. It is true that certain glands of the body have to do with the growth of the body and that other glands have to do with the preservation of its nutritional balance; still others stand in definite relation to emotional activity. But to say or even to hint that our conduct is dependent upon the secretion of a ductless gland or the harmonious activity of all the ductless glands is to speak wholly beyond fact or semblance of fact.

That law breakers often elicit our sympathy requires no proof; we cannot deny personal and public interest in criminals. On the other hand fictitious ones apparently neither interest us nor arouse our compassion. This is unfortunate, for were our intelligence and emotions excited and engrossed, the first step to combat moral imbecility would be taken.

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