

CONTEMPORARY FICTION.

BY A REVIEWER.

FOR many years the writer has had the duty of reviewing three novels at least weekly. This has led him to dip into many more, and therefore he may claim to have some slight acquaintance with current Fiction. It may be said that he has wasted valuable time, and received no benefit from the attention he has devoted to the ephemeral products of ready pens given to chronicling the records of their imagination. He does not agree. Fiction is the most widely read form of literature contained between covers. It is read in the popular daily press, and the journals of largest circulation contain their daily instalment of fiction. It is found in the religious weeklies of large circulation, and the magazines that are the creation of the last generation consist mainly of stories short or continued. Novels are read by all classes. We have seen men in the highest position in Church and State turn out of their cases the "best seller" and devour it with as much interest as the girl who makes her daily journey to and from town. We have known scientists and scholars of the front rank to find recreation in the stories from the pens of those who are most admired in their kitchens—we cannot say "servants' halls"—for even in England scientists and scholars of the type we mention are not rich. There is not a class in the country that does not indulge in novel reading, and therefore it is of the highest importance that those who are in a position to reach the ear of even a small section of the public should know what to recommend and what to avoid recommending.

Our publications are the best reflection of national life. We find in our books the echo of the thoughts, actions and even imaginations of all classes. Time was when theological books were the largest portion of the year's publishing output. Now this is changed, and Fiction bulks more than any two divisions of the year's publications. Take up any number of *The Times* Literary Supplement, which gives the best list of books published week by week, and note the number under the head Fiction, and compare it with that in any other division. The excellent summaries of contents give a fair clue to the character of the books, which will be found to deal

with every department of life. Whatever men do is treated with a frankness that is often repelling and with a sympathy that frequently makes the reader sympathize unconsciously with evil. The characters that pass through the pages may be lay figures or men of flesh and blood. Every one of them has some contact with life as it is lived, and the person who reads with attention is sure to learn something of human nature—although it may only be the imputation of the writer in the pages he or she writes—that will serve him in good stead when he comes into touch with other people. The conscientious reviewer performs a real service if he succeeds in directing readers to the books that will teach and interest most, and by so doing keep them from those that are morally or otherwise harmful.

There are many books that are distinctly hurtful to faith and morals. Unfortunately we have reached a period in which it is necessary to disregard the name of the publisher and even of the author before pronouncing on the character of a book. Time was when the names on the title-page were a guarantee of the cleanness of a volume. That day has largely passed, and some of the best houses and most widely read writers have been responsible for novels that can do nothing but harm. The same fountain seems to be able to give forth sweet and bitter water. The authors who have charmed us by their high idealism disgust us by their low conceptions of morality and by their salacious descriptions of sex relations. One writer brought to task for the coarse patches in his work said, "I cannot help it. I see life as it is, and I am unconscious of abetting immorality or inciting imagination by these paragraphs. They are descriptions of what men and women think and do. Life would not be truly portrayed without them. Honest art demands their insertion." The eminent man who said this has the deserved reputation of living a self-denying life, and devoting himself unselfishly to public service. If art force him to write as he sometimes writes, we seem to be in the presence of a Mr. Hyde in the Dr. Jekyll of the day. We may find something in his apology—for as a rule his work is clean—but we are not convinced that it is right to be coarse in order to be true to life as it ought to be described by our best writers. We are fully aware of the passages in Shakespeare, and the "calling spades spades" in Henry Fielding. But they are not the leading features of their works, and they are a reflection of

the common talk of the day. We can do without the Zolaesque in our present-day fiction.

But these patches that defile in the books of the otherwise clean are not the worst feature of our contemporary fiction. The New Psychology is responsible for a great deal that is subversive of pure thinking and clean living. The over-stressing of the sex element has made its appeal to the weaknesses of a very large number of people. Sex, whether as a complex or as a recognized single factor, lies at the very root of all human life. We are born male or female, and we remain so till the end of our lives. The normal man or woman is not sex obsessed. Sex is persistent in its presentation of itself at the right as well as at the wrong time. This does not mean that the uncontrolled manifestations of sex are something to be recorded and published. It is no reason why the writings of men and women should make the illicit indulgence of sex something to be palliated, and sin to cease to be sin because after all it is the fruit of the strongest motives in our lives. The analysis of sex feelings, and the throwing into relief of sex, awaken in the readers feelings and thoughts that are naturally dormant, and insensibly lead to a lowering of the sense of duty and prepare the way to a downward course. Women are the worst offenders in this respect. They seem to take an unholy pleasure in analysing the steps that lead to yielding to passion and to describe surroundings that had best be left undescribed. Compare the story of the fall of Hetty Sorrel with the similiar incidents in some recent works. We have just laid down a brilliant tale—written with insight into human nature and with the greatest skill. But it is ruined and spoiled for home reading by the long passages that should never have been written and by the apologies for sin, that does not cease to be sin, because otherwise high characters fall into it. And this book is no exception. Another story of the year by an accomplished writer is ruined for those who believe in Christian morality by similar passages. Both of these books stand in the first rank of contemporary novels. They have been welcomed as such by the best judges. They are well written and skilfully constructed. But their influence on the minds of readers cannot fail to be bad. Therefore the reviewer does not notice them, and by so doing tries to render a service to morality. There are some things that ought not to find the entrance into fiction. And reticence on these matters has long

ceased to be observed by a considerable number of writers. The appeal to the imagination in cold print may be as harmful as the appeal by improper photographs.

One of the most striking features of some of the novels we have in memory is the implied sanction of God to lawless unions. The argument runs somewhat thus: "Love is of God; the fact that we love and are all the world to one another proves that we were destined by God for one another, therefore as God is love, He must approve our loving." The thought of sin is wiped out by the strength of emotion. It never crosses the horizon. Pain caused to others is regretted, but as for sin, strong natures do not think about it when they are swept by passion and sustained by the conviction that their love is the greatest thing in a universe ruled by a God of Love who must, in accordance with his character, sanction the love that satisfies twin souls. We see in fiction the danger that is besetting theology. Men everywhere fix their eyes on what they believe to be most in accordance with their own ideas, and by excluding all other thoughts find themselves landed in wrong views of life and God. This return to Paganism in fiction is very often unconscious—at times it is deliberate and even propagandist.

Some of the most discussed of recent novels are frankly pagan in their ultimate conception of life. They return to Hellenism—the cult of the beautiful and pleasant. They give the story of man's quest after what he conceives to be the highest, and after finding Christianity in all its forms to be a failure and unsatisfying, he returns to a Paganism that is purely materialistic. Hedonism in one form or another is the sole end of being, and man can find this end by adapting himself to his surroundings and making pleasure the chief end of living. Some of these works are remarkably well written and show their writers to be possessed of literary charm and ability. Their destructive side is much more convincing than their constructive, and they show that the simplicity of Christ is forgotten in the one-sidedness of His followers. Other writers of this school introduce Christians who put into practice what they believe to be the essentials of religion. We cannot possibly refrain from admiring them in their genuine faith, but they are not only fools for Christ, but are fools in meeting the emergencies of life. They all fail at crises when the men and women who are worldly wise, but at the same time human, come victorious through the struggle. The tendencies

of these two types of books are decidedly anti-Christian, and unconsciously sap the foundations of faith. We are faced by a deliberate anti-Christian propaganda in literature that is calculated to do much injury in the minds of the readers who are by no means aware of the aims and motives of the writers. The return to Hedonism is in many cases a yielding to the easy and pleasant in preference to the hard and unpleasant. In some instances it is part of a distinct propaganda in the heart of the writer who has learned to dislike Christianity and is determined to put in its place a rationalism that is not coldly intellectual, but offers with it roses and raptures—not of vice—but of living in accordance with nature.

There has been a revival of Roman propaganda also in some of the novels that are widely read. These are definitely propagandist. The writers make no secret of their aims. They hold that they have a mission in fiction to commend the Roman Church and to rebuild in England a Church that holds with all that made England "Catholic" in the Middle Ages. Man looks for peace. He struggles vainly against his passions and desires to have his conscience at peace with himself. He has sought this peace in many directions and the sense of sin pursues him. The old Church with its age-long experience of the weaknesses of human nature has learned how to apply the Divine remedy, and therefore the haggard overwrought soul finds in the Mass the meeting-place of God and Man and in the Church the home where all struggle ceases and certainty is secured. There is not only a public for these books, but there is a body of reviewers that recommend them. We wonder whether the reviewers are part of that large body of clever Irishmen who have acquired such influence in the secular Press. It is not so much a deliberate policy of the Church of Rome to control the Press as the willing service of men who are under Roman Catholic influences and believe that by doing the Church service they add to their own merit. This motive has a far larger part in the writing of Fiction and in the commendation of Roman Catholicism than is generally believed. It is more individualistic than organized, and is the direct result of the training given by the Roman Church that to help the Church means the acquisition of spiritual merit.

Lately a type of book has won immense favour. The times are sad. Disappointment is with us all. The dreams of better things after the war have been unrealized and the sense of failure broods

over the souls of men. We know we have failed ourselves although "we have acted for the best"—we see the world is failing us and the times are out of joint. Somehow we feel in some sense responsible for the universal failure, and find in the failures of others that consolation that is expressed in the old saying, "Friends in distress make misery less." Accordingly the poignant stories of the failure of the good or the breakdown of the idealist come home to heart and mind and bring many thousands of admiring readers to the man or woman that has written in this style. Perhaps this phase will pass when men will learn that by earnest work, and women will find that by doing their duty as women, the present sentimentalism—making a luxury of grief—will end. But we do not see what can be done for Society by real good books that show the weaknesses of the neurotic who either does the right thing the wrong way or does the wrong thing the wrong way. Much ability is displayed by the writers we have in mind. They have mastered a style that corresponds with their subject. They may not be grammatical, but this does not do much harm, for their very lack of observation of the rules of syntax makes the books more in touch with the subjects they treat. The sentimentalist who breaks down, the idealist woman who loses the real joy of living, and the dreamer who always is a day late, may have a place in life. But when we have kept too much company with them we are apt to imitate their faults.

Pure romance is not dead. It has taken two forms of late. We have ably revived for us life of a hundred years ago, and when we enter into its spirit we are impressed by its wholesomeness and—at times—violence as a contrast to the sickliness of much of contemporary life presented in fiction. Some of our authors have not been touched by the decadence that has invaded our shores, and we are thankful they are still with us. But have they the circulation the writers who are more in the public eye command? We are inclined to think not, and this is not as it should be. Then we are flooded with stories of man fighting nature in the wilds. The Far West and distant lands and islands are brought near to us. The triumph of human fortitude, endurance and courage are told us in language that is vivid, and some of the nature description is of a high order. We are thrilled as we read, and are now and again pulled up by the invasion of the illicit love that seems to add spice to the tale. Fortunately this is not a usual ingredient in these

tales. As a rule, even when their language is somewhat coarse, there is a wholesome love strain that makes the books wholesome. One point deserves emphasizing. The influence of women in the undeveloped districts is almost uniformly healthy. But then the writers are men. If women are to be seen at their worst their sisters do not hesitate to describe them in language that is at times far from edifying.

It must be said with regret that the new detective tales are not of the first order. They tend to become more and more mechanical, and when science is introduced or legal procedure described, the science is inaccurate and the law is impossible. A well-known lawyer lately said, "Give me a book without any law in it. I have yet to find a novel that is aware of the elements of law." He immediately began to dissect the law of some works he had recently read, and made his hearers laugh at the ignorance of procedure and the law of evidence shown by the writers. A few American, and at least one English, detective yarn pass muster, but the majority prove very disappointing.

Charles Garvice has left no successor. His books were the best sedative for a tired reader. To take him up when the mind was weary was a real comfort. The chapters went from step to step with a uniform development that was always foreseen, and the man or woman who had been wrestling with difficulties which could not be solved or had been vexed by the perversity of human nature, could feel that after all some brains had been left, for Charles Garvice made his characters do what they ought to have done, being who they were. Those who try to follow in his footsteps are guilty of the most flagrant absurdities, and they have not the charm that came from his love of country life and his intimate acquaintance with dogs and horses. It is supposed to be a proof of a commonplace mind to enjoy Garvice—if that be so, then many who are far from commonplace must come down from their pedestals and acknowledge themselves to be men of the people. Why should they not? Is it not simply a recognition that human beings are in the rough hewn from the one tree and that what is common to the race is shared by all.

Having referred anonymously to so many books that ought not to be read, we may be permitted to mention a few works that will please. We have no desire to emulate the foreign publishers who

asterisk works "not fitted for family reading." And we think it unwise to contrast books with one another. Many will recognize the books that form the groundwork of this article, and we have no desire to advertise them to those who do not know them. Stanley Weyman, in *Ovington's Bank*, has given a splendid picture of the railway-speculating era and the financial convulsions that followed. He holds the reader's attention from beginning to end, and his love tale is as natural as it is pleasing. Two new novelists have rightly won attention. *Experience*, by Miss Cotton, is a story that avoids the sensational, deals frankly with many matters of importance and gives us insight into the influence of Christianity on life. Dr. MacKenna, in *Flower o' the Heather*, proves himself to be as clever a novelist as he is brilliant as an essayist and his book is as charming in its portrayal of pure womanhood as it is stirring as a picture of the persecution of the Covenanters in Scotland. These books that have recently appeared prove that English fiction can be pure, wholesome and attractive. But there is room for a writer who can, without pedantry or shibboleth, do for Evangelical Churchmanship what Charlotte Yonge has done for Tractarianism. We can never forget that Fiction has come to stay and cannot be excluded from our homes. It has far more to do with the making of character than most Churchmen believe.

ADDISON AS A STUDENT OF NATURE.

[The following paper was written for a Literary Society by the late Rev. G. S. Streatfeild, who kindly sent it to us for publication. We greatly regret that before it was possible for it to appear in these pages he passed away.]

WE associate the name of Joseph Addison with the study of human nature rather than of nature in the larger sense of the word; yet there are many indications in his writings that, had he lived at the end, instead of at the beginning, of the eighteenth century, and when the love of the beautiful in nature had taken possession of the educated mind, his name might have been associated with the romantic revival that characterized the age of Wordsworth and Coleridge. He may not have possessed that "personal sympathy with nature" that is observed in the writings of Andrew Marvell, the last of the earlier romantic school: the classical reaction, in which Davenant and Waller led the way, and