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REVIEW SECTION.

I.—THE PULPIT AND FICTION.

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A DISTINGUISHED American preacher, in the course of a sermon given in the city of Boston, made a violent onslaught on novels and drew a strong indictment against them. To make his discourse the more pointed he cited Thackeray as an instance of a common vice in novels, viz., a maltreatment of Christians, painting them either as milk-sops or knaves. It chanced that Thackeray was in the audience, and seeking an interview with the preacher after the service enlightened him on some points. It is safe to say that this minister did not again choose Thackeray to point his morals. The incident is worth recalling simply to show that in the treatment of some topics (among which surely is novel-reading) which call loudly for some treatment from religious teachers, wise discrimination is a cardinal virtue. A more timely theme than that which heads this article we cannot well imagine. Recent years have marked an enormous increase in the production of fiction. The law of supply and demand holds as well in literature as in manufactures. The demand is enormous and increasing. New novelists come into vogue every season. A successful novel is an assured source of income. The receipts of such a writer as George Eliot make a very comfortable fortune. Many novels are born only to die—never reaching a second edition. But one has only to look at the indexes of the Seaside Library or Lovell's Library to take in at a glance the amazing growth of this species of literature. In fact it is a literary phenomenon which has only one counterpart in the history of literature, viz., the dramatic tendency in the reign of Elizabeth. Then, and long after, everything ran to drama. It should seem indeed as if the novel-writing tendency would cease soon from sheer exhaustion. All possible plots, all possible varieties of human character would appear likely to be soon used up. As yet, however, this result has not been reached, unless the appearance of such a story as Mr. Haggard's "She" would

indicate the vanishing point of possible construction. In this country the cheapness of the novel in editions already named makes them accessible to everybody. In England a three-volume novel costs so much that the circulating library has to be invoked in order to gratify what else were a very expensive taste. But twenty cents here puts the same novel into the hands of any one. This has its good side, if the novel be wholesome and pure. But it has its bad side too, in the mentally debilitating stuff which is freely published, and a very bad side when the damnable trash is considered, some of which has appeared in both the Seaside and Lovell's libraries and in we know not how many others like them.

And yet the subject needs to be handled by religious teachers with a wise and careful discrimination. But it *should be handled by the pulpit*. The novel is a teacher—active when pulpits and Sunday-schools are silent, effective when these have lost their power. What ground then shall the pulpit take? Assuredly not *proscription of all fiction as injurious mentally or morally*. Such a ground could not possibly be held. The number of thoroughly good novelists and novels is too large, and they offset too strongly all of an opposite class to admit of this position. Walter Scott, Fenimore Cooper, Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and among living novelists, Thomas Hardy, William Black and our own Howells would alone make any such position more than absurd. And yet some of us may have heard in comparatively recent times allusions to novel-reading as if it were, if not a sin *per se*, yet one of those very questionable indulgences which had better be given up and which are in hostility to an earnest Christian life. Novel-reading is classed with card-playing and dancing as forms of worldly amusement which are so inconsistent with moral seriousness that the only rule for a Christian is, "Touch not, taste not, handle not." It is always unwise for the pulpit to take a ground which cannot possibly be held, or held only by creating a sort of artificial conscience, which is quite as bad a thing as any evil results from novel reading. There is undoubted truth in the charge that the minds of the young are sometimes poisoned by what they read in novels. But the charge lies only against a class, and holds good far more of many a newspaper than it does of the novel. There are hundreds of novels which could be read only to moral advantage. They were written by authors of very lofty character and with a high purpose. I defy any person to read Miss Muloch's "A Noble Life" and not feel that while reading it he had been breathing the purest of moral atmospheres and had had his soul softened to finest moral impressions. So with scores that might be named. Not to dwell longer on this point, it may be said positively that a wise pulpit will *recognize the place of the novel in the reading of persons young or old*.

It has fairly won this place. Even if we urge that the modern novel,

having for its ancestors Mrs. Aphra Behn, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne, was in the outset of questionable moral tendency to say the least, as has happened in other cases, it has been quite redeemed. As a matter of fact the novel is of much more remote ancestry, and good Mr. Samuel Richardson in his "Clarissa Harlowe" and "Pamela" posed as the friend of injured and triumphant virtue. Walter Scott lifted fiction to its highest level as a form of literature and made it as wholesome as the air blowing fresh over his own heather. And since his time too many noble men and women have given their lives and labors to this form of literature for the pulpit to take any other position than that of recognition of the novel as having right to a part in our lives. Even if it stood simply on the basis of amusement—for furnishing a pure and elevating diversion for young and old—this would be so. The world cannot get on without recreation. In fact, modern life only seems to intensify the legitimate demand for this in its better form. Burns wrote a poem entitled "Man was made to mourn." But man was made to laugh as well, and we do well to look out for the man who has not found out the wholesomeness of laughter. I do not think Iago ever laughed, and I do not know in the world a sweeter sound than the rippling laughter of childhood. If there can be named to me a more innocent and healthy recreation than reading Walter Besant's "Golden Butterfly," I would be very glad to make its acquaintance. Good novels supply a world of such recreation to many invalids, to tired brains, to young hearts that cannot yet take on them the mightier burden likely to come full soon. But I am ready to go a step further and claim that the novel is often a good teacher. If it is not, then woe to us for our Sunday-school libraries. If these religious novelettes do not tend to make our children better we are badly off indeed. The only fault I have to find with them is on the intellectual side. They are so often poor stuff as literary performances that they tend to breed a taste for the lower order of fiction. Of late more than one good novel has been written bringing to notice the claims of the lower classes in society on our active sympathy and help. Charles Kingsley began the good work, and was bitterly and unjustly attacked for it. If any one desires to see what he accomplished in one instance at least by his novel "Yeast," let him read a letter published in his *Memoirs*, abridged edition, p. 143. And a good illustration of novels of this class is found in Besant's "All Sorts and Conditions of Men." The old charge against fiction, that it imbued its readers with false because dreamy and romantic views of life, in which it must be confessed there was a good deal of truth, has been largely disposed of by the changed type of the modern novel. This deals mainly with life about us, or at least so much with it that it often points lessons of no small value in morals and manliness. At any rate, let us be just and recognize the novel for what in many instances it certainly is, a moral

teacher. When this is done, then the way is open for a further position, and that is the *regulation of its use*. St. Paul has laid down a principle on which, in this case as in many others, the pulpit is called on to act—"using the world as not abusing it" (1 Cor. vii. 31). The pulpit can certainly and strenuously demand that all novels of hurtful moral tendency be proscribed. It can insist and should insist that parents keep a strict and incessant watch in this regard over the reading of their children, precisely as over their companions in life. How are parents to know what are good and what are bad? I believe that the press has done and is doing here an invaluable service. It has not failed to point out with some sternness the evil of certain novels which could readily be named. Let the parent be sure of what the novel is before it goes into the hands of the child. It would be worth the while for any parent to take some pains in the matter. Get a list of works from some one who does know of such fiction as is wholesome, and confine reading to that list. Of one thing he may be sure—he cannot proscribe the novel wholly. Better regulate and take pains about it; and here the pulpit may be an undoubted helper. There are novels published in the cheap form to which I have alluded which deserve the attention of Mr. Anthony Comstock, if it has not been called to them. These publishers are open to the charge which was brought against Socrates, of corrupting the youth. A greater moral responsibility could not well be undertaken than that of putting modern fiction within the easy reach of every cash boy and shop girl and conceding that it has been in the main well met; in certain well-known instances it has been flagrantly violated. The world laughs at all defense of such stuff on the ground of realism in fiction. Let the pulpit sound ever so loudly its notes of warning, but let it insist on wise discrimination—on using fiction as not abusing it.

And still further regulation is needful against excess. There is no earthly doubt that excessive indulgence in fiction is mentally and morally enervating, even when the fiction in itself is unobjectionable. So is too much tennis, or too much party-going, or too much devotion to the tailor or milliner. Nothing in fact needs more care than this, for the appetite grows by what it feeds on, and in consequence of the cheapness of the novel in America, at least hundreds are read now where in earlier times ten were. Like the Sunday newspaper, it has invaded the hours of worship and has usurped the place of the pastor and the church service. Such excess is certainly sin. Preachers should not be silent about it. But if they attempt proscription and not regulation they will err. For after all much of discipline in life must come in the shape of regulation in things innocent in themselves. We must teach the young this code of conduct. It is scriptural, and it is the only course feasible. There is too much that is really good in modern fiction to make any other course possible. There is one thing which pas-

tors might do for the young people of their congregations which would exert incalculable good. If they would meet for one evening in the week the younger members of their flock and give easy and familiar talks on the best authors they would meet a ready response. The best way to forestall or cure any intellectual or moral evil is to put an intellectual or moral virtue in its place. It would be only a restful diversion for the pastor to do enough such reading in the leading authors of English literature to make such a service interesting, lively and profitable. The lives of authors are in themselves often fascinating biography. The cardinal virtue in such an attempt would be to avoid heavy and dull criticism. Let the service be popular and light, such as to waken interest in good poetry, good history, good novels. If only the latter were made the topics of comment, good would be done. Think of such evenings with Thackeray or Dickens or Walter Scott, or with our more recent novelists. If along with such historical novels as Edna Lyall's "In the Golden Days" or Miss Yonge's "Dove in the Eagle's Nest" the actual history of the time is brought in, so much the better. The historical novel is certainly one of its best forms, and many of our novelists have worked in that field.

But in discussing the subject before us, *The Pulpit and Fiction*, there is one part on which nothing as yet has been said. It relates to the preacher himself. *Can he make any use of fiction?* He certainly ought to keep his eye on what occupies so a large place in the thought of the time. He had better keep his eye sharply on the notices of fiction that appear in our best journals and magazines. As a rule they are fruitful in pointing out what is flabby mentally and evil morally. But, aside from this, he will often find the best sort of mental relaxation in a thoroughly good novel. I have never seen anywhere an analysis of what is so well known as *Mondayish* feeling. It is a peculiar condition, in great part reactionary. Along with a sort of physical lassitude there is a degree of nervous or mental excitement, the remains of Sunday's exertion, specially if the Sunday night has been full of "tossings to and fro." But any one who has known what it is knows the need of some pleasant tonic or diversion which will rest the excitement and be a sedative for the overtaxed nerves. There may be other equally good expedients for the cure of this ministerial ailment which, like bronchitis, is the peculiar heritage of the clergy. But a thoroughly good novel, a comfortable easy-chair, an open fire if it be winter time, an open window looking out on some fine view if it be summer time—this will certainly prove a means of rest and refreshment. He will make some excursions into regions of fancy, will be talking with pleasant people, or will be seeing regions and a society to which he has never before been introduced, and here his heart will be touched by a genuine sentiment, or there it may be fired by a generous indignation, anon impressed by some well-put observation on men and manners,

and he will rise at length only more braced for his divine calling. Possibly he may make it the occasion for renewing acquaintance with an old friend, as not long since the writer did with "Old Mortality." How welcome were the familiar characters as one by one they appeared and were interviewed! They had lost none of their charm by age, and as they faded from view the heart could only murmur "blessings on the memory of Walter Scott," for he has brought so much sweetness and light to us and to our children.

We may go further and say that the preacher can gain from fiction useful homiletical hints. For the great novelist makes careful study of men and manners. He makes careful observation on the workings of human nature. Its passions are studied. Its foibles are noted. He describes often in the guise of fiction what are actually the workings of human feelings to which many are strangers. It is not therefore an unreal world to which we are often introduced. Charles Kingsley's "Alton Locke" and "Yeast" are sketches of what he had actually observed, for he kept himself *en rapport* with the working classes all his days. In one of Professor Phelps' admirable papers will be found a study of Hawthorne. It is a close and clear analysis of that novelist's remarkable insight into the workings of a sinful soul. Here he is master. Not even Shakespeare saw more deeply into this side of human nature. And as Professor Phelps has clearly pointed out, the pulpit may gain much from such a study. Its danger always is of being too abstract, of failing to reach the people because it does not present the sin which is actually sinned, the shame which is actually felt, the excuses which are actually made, the remorse which actually stings. Much is rightly said as to the importance of a knowledge of human nature to the preacher. The Great Teacher's power consisted much in the fact that "he needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man." But the preacher does need some one to testify to him of what is in man. His own observation is of necessity limited. He may therefore supplement it by a knowledge of human nature, which need not be discredited because it comes from professed novelists. Aside from this, the preacher may pick up from the byways of fiction many a seed-thought which will ripen into an effective sermon. The writings of George Eliot are full of seed-thoughts. Her altruism, if nothing else, will secure this. No attentive reader of her novels can help noticing how often she falls into the reflective vein. Her novels have decided homiletic value. And it will happen too that the fiction will sometimes suggest a false view of life or a false code in morals or a false doctrine in theology, which the preacher had better discuss and refute. Auerbach's "On the Heights," with its teaching that the true expiation for guilt is by the suffering of the sorrowing soul, is a case in point. The preacher need not allude to the novel, but he can the better repel its injurious tone or tendency if he knows just what has been said by the novel as a teacher.