

wild five pound notes—should you, now?—let alone cross-tempered Fanny Fitzgibbon.

Theresa nodded slightly. The calamity had already begun to seem less overwhelming. Wrath was a stimulant, and Fergus' contemptuous mention of Fanny caused to her feelings as balm.

"And a bit later on," Fergus continued, "comin' towards Michaelmas, say, I wonder might I be axin' you was there e'er a body else in it that you wouldn't think too bad of altogether. But I won't be delayin' you now, for it's tired you are steerin' about, and if you'll take my advice, you'll just go in and wet yourself a cup of hot tea, and get a bit to eat. There's a fire burnin' I know, for I'm after makin' free to heat some water to give this heifer of yours a wash, that's had a dale of drivin' forwards and backwards too. So good-night to you kindly, Theresa, and when I have it all locked up, I'll hang the keys in the holly-bush by the stable-door."

Theresa, turning away, took with her a consolatory remembrance of his words; and as she drank her warm tea by the kitchen hearth, in accordance with his advice, it seemed to her quite within the bounds of possibility that she might furthermore take his hint about next Michaelmas.

ABOUT NOVELS

By ROBT. H. BAKEWELL, M.D.

I was asked a few days ago whether I ever read novels. I took the question as a compliment, as implying, that in the opinion of my questioner, my reading would be confined to medical works, or philosophical or critical ones. But it amused me, because it sounded almost like asking a fish if it was in the habit of swimming. I must have read thousands of tales, novels, and romances in my time, and now I read more novels and other light literature than ever.

The recent prosecutions in Christchurch of booksellers for selling immoral (is it immoral?) or indecent tales, has set me thinking about the subject of novel reading, especially for young people. When I was a boy I was most strictly prohibited from reading novels. One of the severest canings I ever received from my father was given me because he found one of the Waverley novels hidden under my pillow. I suppose it can hardly seem credible that such thoroughly moral and instructive books as the novels of Sir Walter Scott could ever have been forbidden. But so it was. When I grew to manhood, I made some enquiries as to why these excellent tales should have been condemned, and found that it was because the best characters in them were represented as actuated by merely moral motives, and were not in any instance persons who showed any signs of being truly converted!

The first novel that broke down the exclusiveness of the Evangelical party about novel-reading was Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's tale of slavery, entitled "Uncle Tom." This book, when it first appeared, and for years after, had the most amazing popularity. Editions by the dozen appeared in England, for there was no copyright then between Great Britain and the States, and it was sold by hundreds of thousands. It was translated into all the chief European languages, and was made into a play, which is still acted occasionally, both in France and England. I believe that everybody in England who could read, read "Uncle Tom." Topsy, a little nigger girl, who was a perfect incarnation of mischief, was quoted everywhere, and Uncle Tom himself was an universal favorite. The book, it was said, had a larger sale than any other book in English except the Pilgrim's Progress. And yet I don't suppose you could find in any bookseller's shop in Auckland a copy of either book. This book, besides being written by the daughter and sister of evangelical ministers, had such a highly moral and religious tone that the Puritan part of the British public accepted it joyfully. It was followed by "The Wide, Wide World," "Queechy," and some other books by Mrs. Beecher Stowe. The ice was broken, at any rate, and from thence forward religious novels, tales in religious periodicals, and even novels or tales not distinctly religious, but having a moral tone, were tolerated by all the sects.

But, at the same time, there were certain tales, mostly written in the 18th century, which, although they had attained some literary celebrity, and were, and are still, looked upon by some critics as classics, were forbidden to the young. I allude especially to Fielding's and Smollett's novels, and even to Richardson's "Clarissa Harlowe." They were forbidden, and rightly so, not merely on account of the coarseness of the language, but because they contained indecent scenes and descriptions. For precisely the same reason, Shakespeare's plays, in the unexpurgated editions, were forbidden. So was Byron's "Don Juan."

Now a question which has been much discussed, and is not even now positively settled, is whether works of fiction having a distinctly immoral tendency, or containing descriptions or passages that no one could read aloud in any mixed assemblage of men and women, should be sold openly in shops. I suppose nobody will expect an old man, who has passed sixty years of his life in his study and practice of medicine, to be particularly squeamish. It is forty or fifty years since I read any of Smollett's tales, or Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis," and my recollection of them is not very clear. But such as I have does not tempt me

to refresh my memory of them. Smollett disgusted me with his coarseness, but yet to a student of history, desirous of knowing what life in the navy was in the "good old days," his tales are invaluable. To anyone else they are certainly nauseating. A few months ago I read a review of Fielding's "Tom Jones" by some critic who lavished praise on it. I had tried to read it once or twice before, but I could not get through the book, for it seemed to me dull, stupid and wearisome. The characters were all persons of the most commonplace type, and the plot most uninteresting. However, I determined to see whether my present judgment would agree with that of my middle age, so I bought a cheap copy of "Tom Jones," and set to work to read it. But I found it impossible to persevere; I could not get through one half of it, and although I had a look at the conclusion, I did not succeed in plodding through one-half of the book. My own opinion is that, like Zola's books, nasty-minded people read them for their nastiness, and that they have no other merit than being a faithful picture of the manners and customs of the English people in the very lowest period of our national history. Never have we sunk so low as in the eighteenth century.

I know that some people will throw in my face that much-quoted saying, "To the pure all things are pure." I don't know where the quotation comes from, nor who wrote it, but I deny it altogether; and, besides, I would ask, who is pure? On a celebrated occasion we know that among a numerous assemblage of highly respectable men no man thought himself so free from sin as to be able to throw the first stone at the woman taken in adultery. But in fact there are scenes and descriptions and sometimes spoken words, which stick like burrs in the memory, and are never forgotten. It is for this reason I hold that certain books should be prohibited, their republication made a criminal offence, and their sale punished by a heavy fine. Their perusal can do no possible good, and may do much harm. To mention the titles of such books would only lead to advertise them.

Up to a period of last century novels were only published in three forms—either in periodicals or in monthly parts, or in three volumes at £1 11/6 for the three. On such terms, novels were read only by subscribers to libraries. The periodicals that printed novels were published at either a shilling or half a crown a month, except a very few like "Chambers's Journal" or Dickens's "Household Words," which were weekly periodicals, and cost three-halfpence or twopenny a week, or the ever popular "London Journal" or "Family Herald," the cheapest of all as they were sold at a penny. I remember, when a boy, reading Miss Braddon's first novel, "Henry Dunbar," which came out weekly in the "London Journal," about the year 1845. The "London Journal" was illustrated by wood engravings; the "Family Herald" never had any illustrations, but the letter-press was very good.

Dickens, Thackeray and Charles Lever published most of their novels in monthly parts at a shilling. Each part contained two steel engravings, and the novel ran into 20 or 24 numbers. Latterly, I think, the public got tired of these long-drawn-out tales, and no subsequent writers have adopted this mode of publication. The three-volume novel was given up all at once, apparently by agreement among the publishers, for it suddenly ceased to exist. I think about 25 years ago, and was followed by the 6/ story or collection of stories in one volume. I suppose a few very rich people might buy novels in three volumes at a guinea and a half, but I never knew anyone who did; everybody got them from the libraries.

The institution of Mudie's Library in the late forties I well remember, as I knew personally the family. They first had an ordinary bookseller's shop in Southampton-street, Bloomsbury. Their father was a literary man, but little known. They were the first to have graduated subscriptions, from one guinea a year upwards. They soon moved down to their present premises, which have been greatly extended as their business increased. Instead of buying one or two copies, as other libraries had done, they

largely increased the number, until of works likely to be in large demand they purchase hundreds of copies. W. H. Smith and Co., of the Strand, originally only newspaper agents in quite a small way, added libraries to their business, and the railway stations to their business.

In all these ways the circulation and sale of novels has increased amazingly, and I should think that for one novel sold in my younger days a hundred are sold now. The republication of popular novels, after the copyright has expired, must add many thousands to the readers, as these reprints are made at a very low price.

We certainly have no such galaxy of talent among the writers of fiction as illuminated the mid-Victorian period. Thackeray, Bulwer Lytton, Charles and Henry Kingsley, Charles Lever, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, and most popular and most famous of all, Charles Dickens—these names cannot be equalled among the fiction writers of the present day. Every one of the writers I have named has left one or more works which will be classical of its kind. Everyone has created one or more characters which will live in English literature as long as English literature exists. And, it may be remarked, that without shirking any of the tragedies of real life, not one of them has written a page which cannot be read aloud in a mixed company without exciting a blush on the cheek of the most modest maiden. They were pure writers. They neglected, perhaps, the tone of the highest society in England—that of the Court.

I am afraid I have allowed myself to wander away from the topics I had intended to touch on, and run into gossip. But I must defer to another occasion a criticism, which I had prepared, on novels of the present day.

Arthur-street, Onehunga.

October 17, 1908.



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