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by

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The subject has a peculiar sound. This is because of the prejudice against fiction formerly prevalent among religious people. This was due primarily to the belief that only things that were true to fact were really true. Hence fiction, because it dealt with characters and incidents that had no objective existence, must be false. Now we see the fallacy of the old view- while the materials of fiction are not true to fact, they are true to life, and that is the truest kind of truth, for after all reality is the kernel and fact but its outward garment.

Fiction, in the sense we use it, has been written for about one hundred and fifty years. Its influence now is greater than ever before. Accurate statistics from the public libraries of the land, and other statistics, perhaps not quite so accurate, from our publishing houses show beyond a doubt that the amount of fiction read is incomparably greater than that of any other form of literature. In this widespread and growing popularity of fiction lies one reason why the minister should be more or less familiar with it. If he is to give the people what they need in the way of instruction and inspiration, he must know upon what intellectual and moral pabulum they feed. This would be true if the only

purpose of fiction were to amuse- for it is said that a man reveals himself by what he laughs at. Historically, the chief result of fiction has been to amuse. F. Marion Crawford, himself a prolific writer, contends that that is its chief mission. It is he says a "pocket theater." It certainly must amuse- or be a drug on the market. Much fiction past and present pretends to do nothing else- detective stories, tales of adventure, society novels and the like. When one reads the masters, however, there is a lingering suspicion that, underneath the mask of entertainment, they are proclaiming their views of life and the social order.

Thackeray for instance, in"Vanity Fair," seems to have said the final word about what is called "society life." It is amusing in places, it is nearly always interesting, but there is an undertone of seriousness running throughout. Its spirit perhaps may be best indicated by the author's own words in his preface: "Yes this is Vanity Fair; not a moral place, certainly, nor a merry one, though very noisyxxxx. A man with a reflective turn of mind walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other peoples' hilarity, xxxx but the general impression is more melancholy than mirthful." Charlotte Bronte in her preface to "Jane Eyre" fifty years ago calls attention to this characteristic of Thackeray thus: "I have alluded to him, reader, because I think I see in him an

intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized; because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day, as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things." Miss Bronte herself in her greatest novel made a notable plea against bigotry and all merely conventional piety. In reply to criticisms thereof she said: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns." She thus reveals very clearly a serious sub-stratum in her thinking. As for Dickens his sympathy for the poor and outcast classes is well-known. Of late this tendency has increased, and in many novels of today the dominant purpose is not amusement but propagandism. Thus for example we have the theological novel like Mrs Humphry Ward's "Robert Elsemere" and "Helbick of Bannisdale," Marie Corelli's "Master Christian," Hall Caine's "Christian," and James Lane Allen's "Reign of Law." The increased interest in sociology has found reflection in such as Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" which deal with various social and economic problems. This tendency toward didacticism in fiction bids fair to continue, and the preacher will have in the novelist something of a rival. This fact emphasizes and increases the minister's obligation to familiarize himself with cur-

rent fiction. Of course it would be impossible for him to read it all, but through personal conversations, book reviews and the perusal of some of the more representative volumes, it would be practicable for him to know the trend of things.

One use of fiction by the minister we cannot commend- the making of it. This in spite of the fact that some clergymen, such as Charles Kingsley and George MacDonald, have made very respectable novelists. "In His Steps" by Charles M. Sheldon furnishes perhaps the latest notable illustration of this sort of thing. But novelists are born, not made. If any have strayed into the ministry by mistake, it would seem that they would do well to quit it and do their preaching in the way that is easiest for them. On the other hand ministers, at least the rank and file of them, should stick to their work. A first-rate sermon is better than a tenth-rate novel any day and for ministers to inflict upon the public a lot of wooden fiction that is overloaded with platitudinous moral advice is simply to bring their profession into deserved contempt.

The minister then is to use fiction first as a method of ascertaining the intellectual and moral where-abouts of the people whom he tries to serve.

In the next place the minister may very well use fiction as a means of kindling and enriching his own imagination. What people need is not so much more truth, as to have the truth they already know made vivid and real to them. They

crave not light but heat. Men must be made to feel as well as to think. And before the preacher can make others feel, his own emotional life must be full and exuberant. The bane of preaching is its tendency to separation from life, to dry abstraction, to mere moral didacticism. To avoid this and to equip himself for really effective pulpit work, it is all but essential that the minister make some use of fiction. The novel- with its plot and characters and incident- is to him an oasis in the midst of a desert of theological cacti. It furnishes green and succulent pasturage to his hungry sould. Historical romances, such as "Ivanhoe," "Henry Esmond" and "Quo Vadis," do more. They recreate for him the vanished past and clothe with the garments of verisimilitude the people and customs of a long gone time. Their value in kindling the imagination and for actual illustrative purposes is apparent.

Again, the preacher should read fiction for the phychological insight it gives him. He must, if at all successful possess a measure of this none too common quality. He must understand the motives that move men, the ambitions to which they pay the tribute of devotion, the conflicts and crisis which are sure to come in all strenuous soul life. He must be able to forecast the probable action of a soul under the strain of a certain situation, the possibility of its fall, the kind of remedial agencies likely to be of value. Here fiction may be of immense value. Some novels, those farthest

removed from the objective romances of Stevenson and Dumas, are simply biographies of souls careful analytical studies in human psychology. Especially is fiction useful to the minister when it impinges upon the theological or religious domain. And it does so impinge very frequently. For great themes are essential to great novels and a list of great themes that does not include "Sin," "fall" and "redemption" and "confidence" is wofully incomplete. Take the matter of conscience. How rich is fiction in its portrayal of man's soul as a battlefield between the contending forces of good and evil! How vivid these soul struggles become when sketched by a master pen! Take Maxwell Gray's "Silence of Dean Maitland" with its lesson of the danger involved in non-confession of sin; Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Scarlet Letter" which tells the same story with a keeness of psychological insight and a poignant intensity of style that have given it the topmost place in American fiction; George Eliot's "Romola" with its pathetic tragedy due to want of moral firmness; Hall Caine's "Manxman" with its stern thought of the majesty of conscience and its ultimate vindication and triumph; Edgar Allan Poe's "Tell Tale Heart" with its depiction, unsurpassed in the language, of the agony of a conscience burdened by crime- what minister can preach the great doctrine of retribution and leave these books unread? The vitality and virility of his preaching on that topic will be increased ten-

fold if he will but get into intellectual and emotional touch with the questions presented in these great stories. Three minor points may be mentioned.

If a minister keeps himself in touch with current literature, he will be more likely to refrain from indulging in indiscriminate denunciation. For instance, a few years ago Daudet's "Sappho" was placed on the stage in New York. At once a great hue and cry were raised as to the immorality of it. Good men and women were interviewed and a "yellow" journal, presumably for self-advertising purposes got the matter into the courts. Now if these people had only read the book they would have known that it was not immoral, either in teaching or tendency. To be sure, it deals with low, immoral life. But there is everything in the literary treatment of a salacious topic and a person is rather less likely to fall a victim to vice after reading "Sappho" than before. Now multitudes of people had read it and knew these facts. Hence they were highly amused at the antics of the good people. More than that they were probably placed in such a state of mind as to be impervious to any future appeals from that class, even though they were better based than in the instance mentioned. People who cry "wolf, wolf," when there is no wolf, are not likely to be given credence when one really comes. A good motto for moral leaders and religious teachers, is; Be sure of your facts, then go ahead.

Fiction shares with other literature that beauty and dignity of style, without which no preacher can hope to attain his highest usefulness. No man can read Hawthorn, Poe, Thackeray, Stevenson and George Eliot without beneficial results upon his own methods of literary art.

Finally certain kinds of fiction abound with passages of dramatic incident or description that may be used with effect from the pulpit. Such are some of the scenes in "Ben Hur," "Quo Vadis," and the works of Victor Hugo. Few things in literature are more thrilling than the description in Ninety-Three- of the cannon loose in the bowels of the ship, threatening destruction to all on board. As an illustration of the fact that man carries within himself the possibilities of his own destruction, nothing could be finer.

We conclude then that the minister does have some use for fiction. It is of value to him for purposes of information and illustration and for revealing the character of the popular taste; it kindles his imagination, thus enabling him to present divine truth in a fresher, more attractive form than would be otherwise possible; it helps to give him that psychological insight which fits him to understand the perplexities and sympathize with the longings of the men whom he serves.

It is evident that the old-fashioned prejudice of religious people against novels must pass away. It was fundamen-

tally mistaken. Fiction is one of God's great gifts to the race-- like music, painting, sculpture, poetry. It is no more to be discountenanced or left out of account than they are. And surely the minister, whose interests and sympathies are of the widest, most universal sort, can least afford to pass it by.

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