

OPEN LETTERS.

An Open Letter by Mr. George Kennan on a
Question of Judgment.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

SIR: In a letter printed in a recent number of the New York "Commercial Advertiser," under the heading "A Question of Ethics," Mr. Alexander Hutchins of Brooklyn, N. Y., referring to my article upon Russian political exiles in the August number of THE CENTURY MAGAZINE, says: "Mr. Kennan's sources of information were not only personal contact with the exiles, but, as he distinctly states, revelations made to him by Russian officers in charge of the exiles. This latter can hardly be overrated for importance, but it is to the reader a very serious ethical question how this revelation of confidence is to react on the personal freedom of the officials whose identity is so thinly veiled. In the August CENTURY is the story of his introduction to them by the Russian officer in charge of the station, and his confidential conversation with the officer himself. Mr. Kennan covers the officer's identity with an assumed name, but any ordinary detective in a police precinct would have no trouble in unearthing him from the tracks given, and the Russian detective office could find him between daylight and dark with the exercise of a little of the powers of arbitrary arrest with which Mr. Kennan himself credits it. Short as is Mr. Kennan's story thus far, several of his entertainers, who have given him their hospitality and confidence, could be in Russian dungeons and on their way to remotest Siberia on Mr. Kennan's own testimony. To the reader this looks like the most grievous violation of hospitality. It looks greatly like the most cruel of treachery."

As Mr. Hutchins may possibly represent a whole class of readers, it is worth while, perhaps, to reply to his open letter. The question involved seems to me to be a question of judgment rather than of ethics. Among the officials who gave me information in Siberia are men whom I respect and esteem as highly as Mr. Hutchins can possibly respect and esteem any friends of his own. That I would intentionally betray such men to the Russian police and requite their hospitality with "cruel treachery," is a supposition that I am sure few readers of THE CENTURY will seriously entertain. The only question, therefore, that I can regard as raised by Mr. Hutchins's letter is a question not of ethics but of prudence and discretion. Have I carelessly, recklessly, or through errors of judgment imperiled the safety of persons in Siberia who gave me information? Mr. Hutchins thinks that I have; but is he a competent judge? Has he any means of knowing whether the identity of the "officer" whose words I quote in the August CENTURY is "thinly veiled" or thickly veiled? Has he any warrant for assuming that a fictitious name is the only screen that I have interposed between the identity of that officer and the eyes of the police? Where does he find in my article the statement that the officer was "in charge of the station"? Does he know how many officers there are in a garrison town like Semipalatinsk, how

many such officers we personally met, and how many of them were upon friendly terms with the political exiles? Has he any means of estimating the chances of identification in a given case, or the probable results of such identification if established? Is his judgment likely to be better in such a matter than mine?

The best and safest method of utilizing information furnished to me by political exiles and by Russian officials was a subject of serious and anxious thought long before I returned from Siberia to the United States. It became evident to me at a very early stage of my investigation that prudential considerations would necessitate the complete sacrifice of a considerable part of my Siberian material, and would force me to use a still greater part in such a way as to deprive it of half its value and significance. I was for a long time in doubt whether I should not give fictitious names to all political exiles and disguise them in such a manner as to render personal identification impossible. To involve my narrative, however, in a maze of mystification and misleading description would greatly impair, I thought, its historical value, and turn it into something little better than a nihilistic novel. I decided, therefore, to use real names in all cases where I could do so without manifestly imperiling the safety of the people named; to adhere as closely as possible to absolute truth and fidelity in questions of time and place; and to be silent where I could not state facts without compromising persons. This was the course recommended by most of the political exiles whom I consulted.

"It is indispensable," said one of them to me, "that you should name us, describe us, and give your impressions of us. You are not likely to hurt us. The Government knows all about us already, and we can trust your discretion in the use of what we tell you."

The articles that have thus far appeared in THE CENTURY have been received, read, and criticised by political exiles in various parts of Siberia, and my attention has been called, as yet, to only one imprudent statement. So far as I am aware, no person has been injured by anything that I have written.

In the cases of officials, I have been obliged to avoid, to a much greater extent, the use of names, and in a few instances I have employed misleading artifices to conceal identity; but such artifices do not in any way concern an American reader. Every official whom I have quoted or shall have occasion to quote in these papers was perfectly well aware, at the time when he talked with me, that I was obtaining information for use in print. Some of them had a clear and definite understanding with me that the facts communicated should be used in a particular way and with certain specified precautions; others were satisfied to trust my discretion without conditions; while a third class gave me information as they would hand me a newspaper containing only a record of facts well known to the whole community. All, without exception, knew what I intended to do with the information that I

sought and obtained. I am now using this information in strict compliance with my agreements, or in accordance with my best judgment. I share, of course, the liability to error that is the heritage of mortals; but I have had an opportunity to become fairly well acquainted with the conditions of Russian life; I have studied the working methods of the Russian Government with careful attention; I have had the benefit of suggestions and advice from the persons in Siberia who are most directly interested in my narrative; and I am not likely, I think, to make grievous mistakes in the use of the material intrusted to me, or in the adoption of means to protect my friends.

George Kennan.

Sarcasm of Religion in Fiction.

THAT religion and philosophy are getting to be on good terms, there is no question; one is growing rational and the other is fast becoming religious. Father O'Toole may not be much of a philosopher, and Schopenhauer cannot even by courtesy be regarded as a good Christian; still the two worlds of faith and reason are fast melting into each other, and—contradicting physics—will soon occupy the same space at the same time. Will the same process of mutual approach go on between religion and literature, and the subtle antagonism which has long existed between them fade out into mutual respect? The *religious* suspects the *littérateur*, and the suspicion is more than repaid by contempt. Especially is this so as between religion and fiction. The clergyman and the novelist have much in common, but they do not get on well together: the parson cannot understand the author, and the author makes game of the parson. Will they ever get to be good friends?

The sarcasm of religion in fiction has long been the cause of much complaint and hard feeling. Let us turn the matter over in a few sentences with a view to finding out if it is well or ill.

Often this sarcasm is of a mild character, like that found in the Waverley novels, which bears on the rusticity and extreme simplicity of clergymen and the extravagance of certain sects. It assumes a more serious type in the novels of Charles Kingsley, where sects and theologies are brought into odious contrast. It is severer still in the works of George Eliot, who treats church and dogma with semi-contempt and often puts clergymen at the farthest remove from respect. In Dickens the whole range is covered—from gentlest ridicule, as of the Dean in "Edwin Drood," to stinging contempt, as in Chadband and Stiggins. In MacDonald the same thing is to be found—coupled, however, with such earnestness that it passes beyond sarcasm and becomes protest. The lead of these great authors is followed, and a work of fiction is now the exception in which some question of religious faith or practice is not introduced, and treated, for the most part, with disfavor. If the various churches and creeds were to apportion this criticism they would find but little partiality. The formalism and corruption of the prelatical churches, the dogmatism and austerity of the Puritans, the emotional excesses of the Methodists, the ceremonial emphasis of the Baptists—whatever is most distinctive and conspicuous in all churches has been satirized by fiction. Ridicule and travesty

of some form of religious belief or conduct is a part of its stock in trade. The lovers, the catastrophe, the rescue, are not more surely included than is the caricature of some opinion, custom, or character called religious. The most notable example is seen in Dickens, both in the severity of his sarcasm and in its pervasiveness. He not only scourges hypocrisy,—for the most part connected with dissenters,—but, in a less open way, the faithlessness of the whole Church to its trust in caring for the degraded masses. Nearly every book of Dickens sends a keen shaft into the body of the national church, yet with all his courage he did not dare to set up the vices and foibles of the Establishment as a target for ridicule; he stabs it, but not with satire. It may be unfair to criticise an author for what he does not do, but we cannot avoid thinking that Dickens would have left a true exponent of his feelings if he had given the parallels of Stiggins and Chadband to be found in the Established Church, as Thackeray has done in "The Newcomes." In view of the immense field from which Dickens drew his characters, it is strange that he overlooked the English type of clergyman so faithfully drawn by Mr. Curtis in the Rev. Mr. Creamcheese. The Established Church is an ark upon which even Dickens did not venture roughly to lay his hand. Miss Brontë showed a finer courage in her picture of the three Curates, and her works throughout are tinged with slight satire upon traditional forms of religion. We find the same feature in nearly all English and American fiction. Now a sect is ridiculed *en masse*, now certain dogmas, now strictness of religious observance or hypocrisy or bigotry or weak-minded conformity. Forms, dogmas, missions, and revivals are treated almost generally with contempt. A marked exception is found in Hawthorne. That he entertained opinions which, if he had expressed, would have taken this form, some letters quoted by Mr. Fields indicate; but whether a virtue or not, he withheld his pen from sarcastic treatment of religion. The reason is to be found in the superior range of his themes, which are not those of society but of human nature—the abstract rather than the concrete. He is not a Dickens or a Thackeray, but a Shakspeare; his romances are subtle discussions of moral problems that have always vexed the human mind—sin, conscience, and the ways of the bare spirit in man. As a literary artist he could not descend from these heights in order to satirize any special form of faith. Had it come within his purpose to depict a religious hypocrite he would not have connected him conspicuously with any church or creed, but would have kept him within the region of psychology—not as in a church, but simply in human nature. Hence in Hawthorne we find a certain bareness of setting that renders him uninteresting to the average reader.

This habit of fiction has, within a few years, changed its objects of attack. First it was sects, then dogmas, now it is certain types of character. Another distinction of the later period is that untruth is treated more severely than fanaticism. Weakness, inconsistency, hypocrisy, are scourged while intensity of belief is comparatively respected. The habit cannot be explained as a trick of the profession, caught by the many from the chance example of the masters; the originality of genius forbids such an explanation. Nor can it be accounted for on the ground of its