

THE FAMILY PARLIAMENT.

[THE RULES OF DEBATE will be found on page 56. The Editor's duty will be to act as "Mr. Speaker;" consequently, while preserving due order in the discussion, he will not be held to endorse any opinions that may be expressed on either side, each debater being responsible for his own views.]

CAN FICTION BE MADE A POWER FOR GOOD?

(Debate resumed.)

TONY :—I should like to inquire of the hon. gentleman, the leader of the Opposition, if he is aware of the magnitude of the change he is proposing, for a social revolution would certainly ensue if we all adopted his views as to the hopelessness of getting good from fiction.

Has he considered that the term "fiction" includes not only the much-vituperated novel, but the child's fairy-tale, the rhymed romance, the vivid reproduction of the life of our ancestors, some of the most exquisite fancies of the poets, and the plays of Shakespere? Will the hon. gentleman but figure to himself a state of things in which he is deprived of his Shakespere, his Chaucer, his Scott, his Coleridge, and the greater part of his Tennyson? Can he in cold blood imagine his child-friends without their Hans Andersen, their "Arabian Nights," their beloved "Alice in Wonderland," forbidden to make the acquaintance of Cinderella, and Dick Whittington, and Red Riding Hood and her grandmother; not even allowed to sympathise with the sorrows of Rosamond, or to learn how Harry and Lucy made their beds; our boys ignorant of the history of Robinson Crusoe and the travels of Captain Gulliver? Even the "Pilgrim's Progress" must be swept away with the rest.

J. F. HESLOP :—"Fiction a moral force." Granted. But I contend, Sir, that the "force" predominates in favour of moral evil, increasingly so. "The mind is the standard of the man," the faculty of mind is man's noblest possession, by that faculty he ought to regulate the good or evil of his doings. His reasoning powers are the powers by which he must discern between right and wrong. By strength of mind we are enabled to cope successfully with the stern realities of life, therefore it must be clear, Sir, that anything which inclines to frustrate the purposes and endanger the proper fulfilment of the various functions of mind must, in the nature of things, be a grave moral and social evil. Then the question arises—What is the influence of fiction *in toto* on the mind? Why, Sir, it enervates the mind, it stultifies the reasoning faculties of its devotees, by offering them the light, weak food of second-hand imagination, founding moral discernment upon flimsy ideals of fancy instead of sound philosophy and the logic of facts. Feasting on the momentary pleasures of sensationalism, its participants are rendered mentally and morally unfit for the unavoidable realisms of practical life. All this is evidenced by numberless living proofs. Society is outstocked with glib-tongued mental nonentities, so victimised by fiction, effeminating the nation's noblest youth, obstructing the development and growth towards true manhood. Therefore I think, Sir, the honourable Member's three assertions are painfully in want of logical support.

J. BALLINGER :—I have had, Sir, as the librarian of a free public library, many opportunities of observing the habits and idiosyncracies of fiction-readers. I could point to many instances of the wives of men in the humbler ranks of life who come to the library for novels for their husbands, which they select with the greatest care, not because of any knowledge they possess to enable them to judge between good and evil books, but to obtain something attractive and interesting in appearance, and, in some cases, in order that they may tell their husbands how carefully they have selected it, that it looks nice, and so on. And why all this? It is a work of love! To keep the good man in at night, to provide entertainment for him at home, so that

he may not hunger for the hollow friendship of low companions. When I think of how these women have said to me with tears in their eyes, "Ay, sir, but you know how to pick a book to please my husband," or "Will you find me another good one, if you please, sir—it keeps my husband in o' nights," I can have no doubt of the good influence of fiction on the lives of such.

JOHN BISHOP :—A universal affirmative or negative is hardly admissible in this case. To answer the question by Yes or No would be to miss the mark, but yet I incline to No. The Bible, Sir, makes use of parables, or little tales. If they are true, they furnish no excuse for novels; if false, they only excuse very short novels, and that to a very limited extent. I suppose that the space which the parables occupy in the Bible is about a hundredth part of the whole book. Are authors and readers content to limit themselves to that proportion of fiction as compared with all the books they read or write? If so, I have no disposition to find fault. The reading of novels with young and old consumes an exorbitant amount of time. A man so engaged shows that he has a very low estimate of the value of time, and a very poor notion of how to improve it. That is not the way to benefit his fellow-creatures, nor to forward his own temporal and eternal interests. Those who are trying to make the best use of their time are conscious of its rapid flight, but the aim of the novel-reader is rather to kill it. He has not been awakened to a laudable ambition to familiarise himself with arts, sciences, and religion. These cover too wide a field, they demand too much attention and labour to allow of wasting time and mental energy over novels, if one would make much out, and do them justice.

* C. A. PRITCHARD :—Sir,—On this question I feel bound to support our honourable Opener, for Mr. Opponent will never convince me "that fiction even of the best type generally does more harm than good," or that it can possibly be in all cases "a potent source of evil." Did Mr. Opponent limit his censure to bad, trashy, or even indifferent fiction, I could well understand his strong condemnation of the same. But he does not so; he puts his veto strongly, forcibly, and decisively upon fiction of the purest type; he attacks all novels, be they good or bad; and it is on this ground I would venture to take up the cudgels and say a few words in defence of pure fiction. Good fiction has, I believe, a very great influence on the minds of young people, an influence not perhaps at first perceptible, but surely enough there, manifesting itself in a hundred little unseen or unnoticed ways; for as a boy or girl is known by his or her friends, so I think are they both equally known by their books. The story of a noble deed or brave self-sacrifice will bring the ready tears to many a young girl's eyes, will cause a thrill of admiration to run through many a brave lad's frame, as, with a longing known only to themselves in its intensity, they wish they could even do likewise. And that longing is not always transient; it must not always be despised or sneered at as the excitable fancy of a sentimental child; those girlish tears are but the foreshadowing of the woman's tenderheartedness and love; those boyish thrills are but the prelude to the man's steadfastness and faith; they

* This speech is by a winner of the Honorarium in an earlier Debate.

exert an influence on his whole character, an influence which helps him to be nobler, truer, braver than he was before; which shows him there is a higher aim in life than the mere gratification of his own selfish pleasures and wants; which teaches him to think of others as well as of himself, and to be courteous, kind, and generous to all.

MRS. SULLIVAN:—It is only too true that most things which, in this world, are capable of being made powerful agents for good, are also capable of being turned to the worst uses; and thus it is recorded that the inventor of the printing-press was kept awake all night by troubled thoughts of all the harm that printing might do in unworthy hands. It almost seems as if it must be so, for light must cast shadow, and the pendulum must swing as far on one side as on the other. Fiction may be used in the service of evil, but those who think that it is in itself an evil thing, confound it with falsehood. Now, fiction is not falsehood, but is a *vehicle for conveying truth*. Every parable in the best Book of all is a fiction, and might be elaborated into a volume, but each one contains and clothes a truth. The fables of antiquity, fictions themselves, are keenly edged with truths that could not probably be so strongly enforced in any other way. And the very fact that fiction has existed and has been appreciated from ancient times, proves that human nature needs it.

MILLIE RUNDLE:—As I understand this question, Sir, fiction is to be taken as a whole, and therefore it seems to me that the honourable Member, the Opener, has not fairly grasped the subject with which we are dealing when he isolates a few cases from the vast bulk of readers, and tells us, to them fiction has caused great good. Things in this country are happily decided by a majority, and when against these few isolated ones we set the evidence of medical men, who affirm that the cause of many and many a girl's ill-health is the reading of fiction in the shape of novels; when other evidence shrieks at us from within the walls of our lunatic asylums—a very large proportion of the inhabitants of our mad-houses, so doctors say, owe their loss of mind to the excessive poring over trashy fiction—when we ourselves see the mistress of a home deep in the imaginary wrongs of some unreal heroes, while her own children, ay, even her husband, are buried up to their necks in real, true trouble; when we see the lives of, oh! such a vast number of undergraduates simply wasted through their excessive fondness for fiction; when we hear the lame excuse for their efforts being crowned with the "wooden spoon," that they "really—aw—have had no time—aw—for solid reading"—then, Sir, I think all of us will find it a hard matter to say fiction as a whole can be made a power for good.

J. EATON FEARN:—I think no one will deny the fact that trashy tales have a very injurious effect on the people who read them; and surely it is a logical inference to draw that if inferior literature has a power for evil, good literature must have a contrary effect. I believe, Sir, that many a one through reading fiction has imbibed a literary taste, and thus sown the seeds of future attainments. Why, if fiction must be removed from our shelves, just think of the precious, soul-inspiring, and delightful works which would have to be destroyed! It touched your heart, and stirred a good feeling in your soul, did it not, my reader, as you read of the heroic deeds related by Homer or Virgil in their immortal poems? Thousands of thirsty souls have drunk deep in all ages of the sparkling water in this well of great literary lore. Who, indeed, has not received comfort from the reading of such a book as the "Pilgrim's Progress"? Must our children henceforth be refused to read "Arabian Nights," "Robinson Crusoe," or such-like innocent stories? Surely not! But apart from the literary pleasure derived from a perusal of fiction, I contend, Sir, that no one can read a good author without profit in one way or another.

MARGARETTA MARSH:—To begin with, I must ask Mr. Opener the difference between a "good" lie and a "bad" one.

You cannot have a good lie, and, in my opinion, fiction is the same. It is, according to Walker, an invention or lie; therefore, I say, how can any fiction be termed good? I place *all* fiction under one head—viz., bad—although I acknowledge that some is very bad. My reason for classing all as bad is because I have found that all fiction is hurtful to me. I have not been long in the world, but I should say no one has read more novels for their age than I have, both what Mr. Opener would call "good" and "bad." These books of lies have had great fascinating powers with me, and, though a forbidden pleasure (as I then thought), many have been the nights I have sat up in my room to finish reading the adventures of a hero or heroine. Indeed, once I dropped to sleep over the romantic nonsense, and set the bed on fire.

Many instances could I give of life ruined through novel-reading, but time will not allow, and, in conclusion, I unhesitatingly assert that no fiction or lie can be made a power for good until the fiction is taken out of it. I have much pleasure, Sir, in supporting Mr. Opener.

A. D. G.:—I believe that fiction can be made a mighty power for good. A love of fiction seems inherent in human nature, and like every other feeling implanted in us, may be turned to good account. When our great Church poet said:—

"A verse may find him who a sermon flies,
And turn delight into a sacrifice,"

he was thinking, no doubt, of his own sacred calling, but the remark holds good for things secular as well.

FLORENCE RHODES:—The Opponent says that if fiction is realistic it must often show vice triumphant. True, but who envies the rich uncle the wealth which he gets from the murder of the Babes in the Wood? Who would be Lady Macbeth when she has attained the object of her ambition, but has lost all that makes life dear, and gained a "mind diseased," which gives her no rest till she is driven to self-murder? Even when the wicked are throughout victorious by means of their crimes, the novelist who is true to life must depict such remorse, followed by the searing of the conscience and deterioration of the moral character, as forces one to acknowledge that virtue in rags is preferable.

Other speeches, supporting Opener's argument that Fiction *can* be made a Power for Good, received from:—A. L. C., Mrs. S. (Leamington), L. K., J. N. Montgomery Campbell, W. T. Osborne, A. Harrison, J. Sutherland, Emmie Jeffrey, T. W., E. Q. V., M. Stobart, Rees Thos. Heins, W. King, E. Bollam, Annie White, A. M. M., Mrs. Nicolle, K. G., May Tarbolton, Alice D., Lucy Holmes, Marie Compton, M. Muir, F. Clements, Jessie Donisthorpe, Curio, W. A., A. W. S., W. Speakman, F. E. Sancto, Russell Bransby, C. Sargeant, Anon., Susie Welch, F. Moberly, James Young (Belfast), J. Cullen Sawtell, F. W. Brewer, James Pichover (2), J. Holmes, F. Maitland, Frank Crouch, James Young (Edinburgh), J. Ture, Henry Maclean, W. H. T. (Neath), B. Gray, M. R. A., Redclyffe, E. E. M., J. R. T., J. Maxwell, E. Harwood, Lizzie Carter, F. W. Stuart, J. Routledge, Miss Roger, F. T., Aimée, J. J. M. Davis, W. T. Shannon, R. L. Fleming, Lillian Rose, Thomas P. Gordon, F. A. Wood, H. Dixon, J. Trewavas, H. L. G. (Abingdon), Annie M. Brunston, G. S. Selby, W. J. Ritchie, J. A. W. Oliver, Lucy Awdry, and others.

Other speeches, supporting Opponent's argument that Fiction *can not* be made a Power for Good, received from—G. D. Clark, Ash Grove, Felix Homo, F. Gibson, Milly Palmer, S. T. Twomly, M. E. Rangdale.

TOTAL NUMBER OF SPEECHES RECEIVED:—Supporting Opener, 83; supporting Opponent, 11.

The Honorary of One Guinea is awarded to Catherine D. Logan, 10, St. Stephen's Crescent, Bayswater, London, W., whose speech will be given in our next issue.

The Debate on the next question, "Should Early Closing be made Compulsory?" will be resumed in our next issue.

THE FAMILY PARLIAMENT.

[THE RULES OF DEBATE will be found on page 56. The Editor's duty will be to act as "Mr. Speaker;" consequently, while preserving due order in the discussion, he will not be held to endorse any opinions that may be expressed on either side, each debater being responsible for his own views.]

CAN FICTION BE MADE A POWER FOR GOOD?

(Debate concluded.)

G. S. SELBY :—I dare venture to assert from observation that fifty per cent. of the readers of our land have had the germ of a taste for *good* reading first implanted by the reading of works of fiction. Dr. Adam Clarke, the commentator, had his interest aroused and his attention first turned to the study of Eastern matters by the perusal of the "Arabian Nights." Jules Michelet, the French historian, like many another lad, had his youthful imagination fired by the reading of "Robinson Crusoe." And who, Sir, amongst the members of the Family Parliament has not to thank the perusal of some work of fiction at an "impressionable age" for many a pure and noble resolve, the benefits of which were felt in after-years?

The insidious query of Opponent as to whether people are not as liable to choose the bad as the good may, with equal justice, be asked of any book in creation.

H. G. L. (Abingdon) :—The Opponent in his remarks denies that fiction, with its evil and good, can be made a power for good. I think it can. It is, I know, difficult to draw the line between harmful fiction and that which is pure and healthy in tone, but in all things bad and good are mixed, and novels as a class should not be condemned because they are in keeping with this rule. It is useless to try to bolster up the morals of our youth by the exclusion, for instance, of such a widespread and, it might be said, subtle influence as that of fiction, which portrays, and itself is made up of, good and bad, pure and evil. Let youth see both, and in nine cases out of ten the good—speaking strictly of that found in books—will be most powerful, and will leave its mark on the character. All who have the power to do so should strive to make fiction, whilst not less interesting, still worthier of the place it occupies in nineteenth-century literature; and, if this is conscientiously aimed at, then it can be a vast influence for good. Finally, Sir, let no honourable member of the Family Parliament veto fiction before reading "John Halifax, Gentleman."

W. J. RITCHIE :—Works of fiction can be made a power for good by acting as an antidote to the theatre, the gaming-house, the dram-shop, and the allurements of evil companions; and the love of retirement acquired by reading works of fiction has been the means of making many a man reflective, and a useful member of society, whose influence would otherwise have been baneful.

M. E. RANGDALE :—I am rather young, but would like to say a few words on this subject. For some time it has been one of great interest to me, having observed the difference between my friends, those who read fiction and those who do not. The former take little, if any, interest in any pursuit; they are absorbed for a few hours in a novel, the rest of the day is spent in dreamy idleness. They have a craving for some excitement, and their present life to them seems a mistake. Sir, to me fiction seems something the same as intemperance. People get a liking for it, and they go on from a little reading to more, until it is with difficulty they lay down their books, no matter how important the duty is that calls them away—unkind and hasty words are too often spoken. Poison is good in some cases, deadens pain, so fiction deadens the good and noble traits in a man's character.

* CATHERINE D. LOGAN :—On first glancing at the above

title, I thought there could be few who would venture to deny that fiction has been, and is, a mighty power of good; but after a careful search for actual results hitherto obtained by *individuals*, I must confess they are few. Nevertheless, I still hold that it could be made a great means of good amongst all classes of readers.

The question is a difficult one, for no one can determine how much of the story he has been reading is "make-up," nor which of its characters are fictitious. For my own part, were I able to write a good story, a considerable part of the plot, and certainly most of the personages figuring in it, would be taken from life, and would likely be the people with whom I in my small groove had come in contact. My novel would be classed under the head of "fiction," yet little of it might have been due to imagination, and very much might have been simply the narrative of real lives and actual events somewhat coloured. We know how the story of some *actual* wrong inflicted—some *real* hardship endured—some noble life spent—fires us with indignation, moves us to pity and sympathy, or inspires us with a great ambition to make *our* lives pure, true, and brave, and why should not fiction do the same? It seems to me to rest very much with the readers themselves as to whether what they read is working in and through them for good. I am convinced that, as a rule, the lives that are ruined through the reading of fiction are those whose principles are weak or bad, and whose characters are ill-regulated and uncontrolled. One person may read a book and be none the worse, ay, and will even gain strength, courage, faith, or any other virtue from the reading, whilst another reading the same work may be affected in the contrary way.

While, doubtless, much rests with the reader, still fiction might be made a very much mightier power for good, if authors would write with a distinct aim in view beyond the mere fame and gold they hope to get. There are plenty of evils to be redressed in all classes of society, and writers have the greatest chance of making them known, which is one step towards the remedy.

It is a broad question, but if the greatest Teacher the world has ever known—He who came to work the good of all men—did not disdain the use of metaphors, but adapted His teaching to the capabilities of His scholars, we shall, I think, be quite safe while we follow His example. He knew that few would care to listen to long discourses, so He took a better way, He told them many things in parables, because He had much to say to them, and because He knew that the nearest way to the hearts of men was then—as, indeed, it is now—to tell them stories of their own times and countrymen.

Do not think me irreverent if I say that all the parables given by the Great Master are but a sort of fiction. Yet what Christian ever would dare to question the good they have worked? Who would ever try to calculate the number of lost ones found by hearing or reading the simple story of the Prodigal Son, who, when he came to himself, arose and went on his way home to his father, and who, when yet a long way off, saw that father seeking him, and ready to welcome his sinning son home again?

Therefore, I maintain that fiction can be made a very great power for good, if each of its writers would only write when he has something to say, some lesson—be it great or small—to teach, or some grievance or wrong to be redressed,

* To this speech the Honorarium of One Guinea has been awarded by the Editor.