

## A Review of Some Recent Fiction.



THE pre-eminent quality of all books of fiction lies in their power to amuse. To help to beguile an idle moment, or to divert us from the heavier mental occupations of our days, is the supreme mission of the novel. And yet the novels that merely amuse have no enduring quality. Our best writers introduce other elements besides pure diversion. To judge from those that are acknowledged as the best we have, the presenting and discussing of social, religious and moral questions comes within the scope of the novel. It is noticeable that the books which take the strongest hold on popular imagination are not the most diverting. Shakespeare wrote to draw audiences to the theatre, and it is quite conceivable that "Much Ado About Nothing" or "The Merry Wives of Windsor" pleased those rude audiences much better than "Othello" or "Hamlet" could do. Yet we to-day are better informed regarding the two latter than the two former, because of some quality quite distinct from mere diversion.

To thoughtful readers, then, the novel presents two phases, its material and its motive or message. As to material, we must bear in mind the conditions under which recent novelists are working. During the many years since the first novel became popular, writers innumerable have exercised their art in this department, with the result that it is becoming more and more difficult to find material for novels that has not been worked over and over again. Mine after mine has become exhausted by this army of gold-seekers. Placer mining is no longer profitable, at least in the old fields, and now it has become necessary either to seek entirely new fields, or to delve deep down and with great labor and wearisome searching to find some store of the precious metal. Rider Haggard goes to the wilds of Africa and South America, or to Iceland, for his material; Kipling to far-off India with its heathenish customs and stirring, strange life; Crawford to Italy; Ian Maclaren, Barrie, and Crockett to the peasantry of Scotland; Anthony Hope to some fabulous island in the Mediterranean or some equally fabulous kingdom in the heart of Europe. On the other hand, Hardy seeks his material among the unheroic of the lower and middle classes of England, probing their wounds and cauterizing their sores with the cruel fidelity of a surgeon. Hall Caine deals with life and its mysteries as it appears to the native Manxman.