

**THE ETHICAL AND
RELIGIOUS VALUE
OF THE NOVEL**

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The ethical and religious value of the novel by Ramsden Balmforth

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The
Ethical and Religious
Value of the Novel

BY

RAMSDEN BALMFORTH

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PREFACE

THE various chapters in this little book were originally given as Sunday evening discourses to my congregation in Cape Town. They were prepared with the object of showing that ethical and religious teaching concerning such grave questions as Sin, Heredity, Will, Atonement, and the spiritual destiny of man should be universal in its scope, and that it should not be confined, in its illustrations and subject-matter, to the experiences of the Jews and the early Christians, or, in other words, to Biblical literature. Ethical and religious problems face us every day and hour of our life. They may be illustrated from the best literature of every age, but especially from literature which brings us into close contact with the conditions of modern thought and life. Fundamentally,

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ethical and religious problems, the relations of man to the Infinite, are much the same for every age. They differ mainly in their appeal to our differing temperaments, to our strength or weakness of will, our varying knowledge, our spiritual experience, and our courage in the realisation of our aims and ideals. The call which came to Isaiah, to Jeremiah, and to Jesus, comes also to the thoughtful modern mind, differing only in form, in circumstance, in strength and insistency.

The novelist sets himself to deal with these various problems as they manifest themselves in human life and character. Like the poet and the dramatist he is a critic and an interpreter of life. He stands between the poet and the philosopher. He tries to hold the mirror up to Nature, and the greatest novelists—Meredith, Tolstoi, Thackeray, Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot—show us life, not only as it is, but as it might be. That too,

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is the aim of the preacher. But I am inclined to think that the novelist and the dramatist exercise a much wider influence than the preacher. It is no use burking the fact that the vast majority of the people, in many countries, are falling away from organised religious worship and no longer go to Church. Of those who do, only a proportion listen attentively to sermons, and of that proportion a considerable number forget all about the sermon in a few days or a few hours. Very frequently, indeed, the theme of the sermon has to do with matters which lie far away from the every-day interests of the worshipper. On the other hand, the novel, in some form or other, appeals to most thoughtful, and to many thoughtless, people. It deals with incidents, situations, feelings and circumstances, in which we have a real and lively interest. It takes hold of us, fascinates us, and often leaves a lasting impression upon the mind and feelings. In describing the clash of Will, Soul, and