INEBRIETY: FICTION AND FACT.

By GEORGE H. R. DABBS, M.D.

I WAS once speaking to a man who held the record of police convictions for drunkenness. He was a gentleman born, and had been a great athlete. I met him in a prolonged parenthesis of sobriety, and I believe his brain-cells were at the time he conversed with me fairly free from alcoholic soakage. He said, "Depend upon it, the habit that Society has of treating drunkenness as a comic incident has something to say in the matter of how the drunkard is led to regard it."

I have often thought over this phrase, and not always with absolute equanimity. I took up an old volume of an illustrated comic paper the other day, and I found allusion after allusion to drunkenness, and always from the laughable side. I have been considering whether fiction treats it fairly from the standpoint, not so much of laughter, but of veracity, and it has occurred to me whether the stage is fair to it. And I have thought I would just jot down my impressions. I will not allude further to the comic papers: they exist to be funny, and occasionally justify their existence. Naturally, their view of drunkenness is not preventive. And now I come to the stage. At the time he wrote "Caste" I was constantly in the company of Tom Robertson, and when "Eccles" dawned upon the world, through the dramatic agency of George Honey, I was full of applause for that variety of drunkard that gravitates between the bar-parlour and the swallow-nested attic. The humour was undeniable, and the "symptoms" were part of the humour. It was a great creation—is still a classic impersonation—but was it deterrent? I think not.

When "Drink" (Charles Reade's version) came out at the Princess's, I naturally studied the Coupeau of that realistic stage-

drunkard, and after the most harrowing scene of the whole play, I glanced up at the gallery—I never saw so many black bottles going round from mouth to mouth as I saw that evening. I am afraid the Anglicized and dramatized Zola was not a deterrent. Charles Reade always thought it would be—that I happen to know—but I don't think it ever was or ever will be.

Now, to leave the stage for the nonce and refer a little to works of fiction, I conceive that Mrs. Wood's "Danesbury House," which I believe was a prize-competition-book on the subject, is about the strongest story (with an object) which was ever written. But I should like to narrate a little incident in connection with that particular book. Once upon a time I had the idea (I have outlived it, I regret to say) that a story such as this, so overfull of the pathos and potency of assumed heredity, might influence for good the subjects of the drink disease. I carefully abstained from any criticism of the book, and read it through aloud night after night to two chronic drunkards of my acquaintance. I happen to be a fairly good reader, and I threw myself heart and soul into the narrative, and read it for all I was worth. I knew quite well I was holding my audience, but I did not know how much, till one night, being called away to a case which occupied me a couple of hours, I came back to find they had prized open my (locked) sideboard with the poker, and were both blind-drunk on the floor. I think my first thought was one of humiliation, but my next had reference to a new galvanic battery, and second thoughts are sometimes best. My friend the Vicar, who died Dean of Windsor, laughed himself nearly into a fit over the case as I told it, and, being a strict abstainer, declared it was my fault for being such a hypocrite as to read a homily while practising the sin—in moderation.

I am a fairly omnivorous reader, but as I cast back my mind and memory to all the books I have read into which drunkenness enters, I cannot honestly say that I believe the effect of any of them will be so lasting as to *deter*.

It may be objected of all books but "L'Assommoir" that their authors leave out the bestial side of drunkenness. And I don't know that it would be of much use to include it. When the fiction of the day touches the surrendered and perverted self-respect, the habit of alcoholic lying, and all the signs of intellec-

tual derogation, then we, now and then, get a true picture which is not overdrawn.

Perhaps a book written with another purpose—I mean “*Esther Waters*”—more truly than any book of fiction known to me, shows how alcoholic addiction intensifies the parasitic habit and italicizes the down-grade details of sloth and lust. But, as a rule, fiction that typifies, or tries to typify, moral degradation through drink occupies itself too much with effects on the lives of others and too little with the sliding scale of continuity in the personal downward path.

These are only preliminary remarks as to a future and more detailed series of articles which, by the favour of the Editor, I may perhaps be allowed to contribute.

REVIEWS AND NOTICES OF BOOKS.

INEBRIETY AND POVERTY.

POVERTY: A STUDY OF TOWN LIFE. By B. Seebohm Rowntree.
Fourth edition. Pp. 426. London: Macmillan and Co.
1902. Price 2s. 6d. net.

Mr. Seebohm Rowntree's monumental study will take its place among English classical sociological monographs. It is the most serious and thorough detailed investigation of the life of the wage-earning classes in a fairly typical provincial city—York—and affords much new light on the problem of poverty. The general characteristics of the locality are sketched, and the social and economic conditions of the wage-earning class clearly indicated. The standard of life is well expressed by convenient division into four classes; the poverty class is divided into two sections: (1) “Primary” poverty, where the total earnings of the family are insufficient to obtain the numerous necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency; and (2) “secondary” poverty, where the total earnings of the family would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful. The immediate causes of the poverty are carefully