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### ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

**J.R.H.**—Many thanks. Will dissect that absurd 'nun and nobleman' story in next issue. Overcrowded this week.

**W.H. (Dunedin).**—The Church never taught, but, on the contrary, has ever condemned, any and every doctrine of the pre-existence or re-incarnation of the soul. (2) In the early ages of the Church, the Simonian, Ophite, and Valentinian Gnostics and others taught a bewildering number of contradictory and generally fantastic theories of re-incarnation. Some of them professed to receive the Christian Gospel, interpreting it after their own peculiar fashion; others were openly and bitterly hostile to it. All of them were ever regarded by the Church as heretics or as infidels. Valentinus, one of the early theorists, was excommunicated by Pope Hyginus, who reigned from A.D. 139 to 142. The rest, as they arose, were duly 'lifted' by the Pope over his garden-wall. They vanished while the Church was still young. (3) None of them held the peculiar doctrine of re-incarnation taught by Theosophists in our day. (4) Origen was condemned by the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553) for having held that human souls pre-existed before the creation of Adam. But his teaching, as given and condemned in the decree (Hefele, vol. IV., p. 219, E.T.), is worlds away, as to its details, from that of modern Theosophists.

### DEATHS

**GEANEY.**—At Timaru, on February 6, Elizabeth, wife of Humphry Geaney, Makikihi; aged 30 years.—R.I.P.

**MAHER.**—At Georgetown, Invercargill, on February 2, 1906, William S., dearly beloved husband of Matilda Maher, and second eldest son of the late John Maher, Kew.—R.I.P.



*To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.*

LEO. XIII. to the N.Z. TABLET

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1906

### OUR CIRCULATING LIBRARIES



SOMEbody once asked good old Hobbes why he did not read more. 'Read more!' he exclaimed; 'if I had read as many books as other men, I should have been as ignorant as other men.' The saying may seem a paradox; but it is particularly true of a large class of the readers that form the clientele of our public and circulating libraries. The cultured and scholarly vice-president of the Dunedin Athenaeum (Mr. T. Whitson) gave an address last week at the annual meeting of the institute which is sufficient to shake one's faith in the benefit of public libraries in this country, unless the mass of the subscribers are to experience a change of heart and radically alter their reading-habits. There is reading and reading. There is the reading that widens the range of experience and stores the mind with helpful thoughts and useful knowledge. But there is also a kind of reading that, in the words of Samuel Smiles, is merely 'the

indulgence of a sort of epicurism or intellectual dram-drinking, imparting a grateful excitement for the moment, without the slightest effect in improving or enriching the mind or building up character.' And, judging by Mr. Whitson's words, this latter is the class of reading—or rather of intellectual hasheesh—that is mostly indulged in by the habitue of the circulating library. For this seems to be a case in which, for this country at least, we may safely assume that the experience of one centre of population stands for all.

The facts for which Mr. Whitson vouches may be summarily stated as follows: The chief demand is for fiction. 'Of the total issue of books, works of fiction account for 89.2 per cent., the remaining 11 per cent. being spread over eleven other departments; biography coming next to fiction, although only representing 2½ per cent. It will make it more easily appreciated if I state that during four months, out of a total circulation of 22,716 books, 20,381 were novels.' 'And I am sorry to say,' added Mr. Whitson, after an exhaustive analysis of the circulation of various authors, 'that the quality of some books which are in very great demand is of the poorest.' The best writers of fiction are left in comparative neglect. So are works on science and 'belles lettres.' And, speaking generally, 'compared with fiction, the circulation of books in other departments of literature is productive of sorrowful reflections.' Judging from another remark of Mr. Whitson's, a 'professor of books' would seem to be one of the urgent needs of the hour in our circulating libraries. 'The reasons,' said he, 'which induce subscribers to take out books are many and curious. Only a small minority ask for works from a perusal of the catalogue. They either ask the librarian to recommend a book, or they are attracted by the appearance and title of a book as it lies before them on the table; or in walking round the shelves they see books that attract them, and a curious fact is that the books on the shelves in a line with the eye are mostly favored. The shelves above or below the line of vision are neglected. Then the circulation of a book is largely affected by the favor it finds in the eyes of early readers who recommend it to others, or by reference to it in the newspapers. The condition of a book also influences its circulation; some members will rather take a copy of a book they do not know than a soiled copy of one that is favorably known. For this reason the novels in largest circulation are mostly those of which there are a number of copies.'

All this makes melancholy reading. The need of the day is not so much more readers as better readers. As matters stand, it seems that our public circulating libraries are more of a calamity than a blessing to the community, and that, to meet a certain taste, Carnegie's benefactions are very likely to be in part expended in packing library shelves with namby-pamby and sensational tenth-rate fiction—with yellow-backed agonies brimful of intrigue, mystery, and murder. Of the two kinds of works of fiction that seem most in demand, Dr. Pryde says: 'If they are namby-pamby, reading them is like sipping jelly-water; if they are sensational, they are like Mrs. Squeers' posset of brimstone and treacle. In both cases they destroy the mental appetite, and make it loathe all solid food.' The great mass of the novel-reading public are finical about their tea and beer and beef and tobacco. But they seem to have no standard by which to judge of the quality of the books on which they feast their minds. The difficulty of choice is increased by the overwhelming number of volumes of fiction that come tumbling from the press. It is still further enhanced by the prevailing habit of devouring (not merely reading) novels—eating up circulating libraries, so to speak, and then, like Oliver Twist, coming up serenely for more. For many of those to whom Mr. Whitson refers, novel-reading is