

"blood and thunder" stories, as they are sometimes called. Stories that are heralded by huge handbills, with monstrous wood cuts, disgracing innocent fences and trees in country villages. It is very humiliating to be assured that these find numerous readers.

Stepping a little higher, though still a good way under ground, we come to another class of stories that make great pretensions to respectability, sent forth to the world in papers and magazines, that demand recognition of scholarly and well read people, and sometimes secure their claim.

In addition to the works already named, there is a somewhat numerous class, put forth by well meaning persons, not positively injurious, but negatively so: not poisonous, but innutritious.

This plague is becoming more and more alarming: the degenerate press is more prolific than ever. Its issues come up into the kneading troughs and the ovens, and pollute the air with their stench. If all this mass of useless matter, together with the worse than useless, were collected together and should receive its deserts, what a bonfire there would be.

When it is remembered that the longest life and the amplest leisure, and the keenest vigor of intellect are sufficient only to master a few of the really great works, and when it is remembered how meagre the allotment of time, in case of most people, given to mental culture, it seems almost a crime to devote so many precious hours to trash.

A survey of this subject is calculated to give little satisfaction to thinking persons. That a people to whom are accessible the vast treasures of the English language, should reject its pearls and gold, for wayside pebbles, is humiliating. The question to what extent, and from what source, we may expect a remedy is one that will awaken serious thought in the minds of all who really desire the education of the masses. Few more important practical questions meet earnest educators and demand a solution than this,—how to secure to our people a healthy literary taste?

Of course, whatever is done must have reference mainly to the future. The habits already formed will not be likely to yield to efforts made to uproot them. The field of hopeful labor is among children and youth: and, when we remember that this vitiated taste is an unnatural one, like the taste for tobacco, that nature is on the side of reform, there is reason to hope that earnest efforts with the young may be, to some degree, successful. All proper measures to secure to the young a good literary taste, and to make them acquainted with the wealth of English literature, should be heartily endorsed by the friends of popular education.

E.

A WASTED GIFT.

BY GEO. S. BURLEIGH.

THIS world would be highly educated, if the morbid curiosity which leads men to devour the details of every shocking and disgusting affair, were, instead, a healthy appetite for that knowledge which enlarges the mind and improves the understanding. In every neighborhood are people with an insatiable thirst for all that is unprofitable, and especially if it tend towards indecency, who yet have no interest for the most curious details of scientific discovery, or the latest result of philosophic thought. They are past masters in petty gossip with a touch of scandal in it; and can bring down a reputation at a hundred yards, with one shot of their rifled throats, like the Jaculator fish that makes a squirt gun of its mouth to shoot its prey from the bushes over the brook.

We readily call to mind many excellent citizens, and prospective citizens of the new franchise, who are deeply erudite in the entire range of useless knowledge, having the most inexhaustible fund of patience in worthless inquiries. By long habit, they acquire a surprising ingenuity in supplementing scanty facts with ample interpretation, and, indeed, their happy guesses are enough to make the fortune of a naturalist. They track a faint clue with such fatal facility, to the lurking fact. Agassiz wins great credit for skill in interpreting the significance of a shell, a bone, a scale, or the rude fragment of a fossil lobster. Out of the left-hand corner of one caudal "flipper,"

transformed into rock now these thousands of years, he will build you up, by the mere force of his suggestive imagination, the hugest crustacean that ever escaped boiling by living ages before lobster pots and fishermen were invented. From a single scale of an extinct species, he will restore the whole fish, with an accuracy that condescending nature declines to improve upon, when she surrenders the entire fossil from another bed.

It is precisely this acuteness of the imaginative faculty, allied to great keenness of observation, that has made him the master that he is in the scientific world.

But we have unlearned farmers' wives in this very State of Rhode Island, who will pull out a mystery from its hole, by a smaller tip of its protruding caudal terminus, then Agassiz ever dreamed of snatching at. Only the mystery will be some utterly worthless circumstance, that can furnish no meat for the slightest mental digestion.

I have seen one of these sharp students of the Useless detect the visit of a stranger at a house fully two miles away, with the build of the wagon, the color of the horse, and a shrewd dash at the very errand on which he had come; and yet there was but a square rod of ground from which the premises were visible. It was done by sharp seeing and smart guessing, and a long habit of verifying conjectures by actual enquiries. Had the same skill, with no more mental power, been turned to unhooking the secret-habits of some hitherto "lucky-bug," or to the meaning of the obscurest of Frauenhofer's lines in the solar spectrum, the domain of science would have been enlarged by acres. So with the average readers of the endless issues of the popular press, wise and otherwise, you will notice with what headlong gravitation they run to the malarious swamps of scandal, the foodless seas of shallow fiction, and the thin froth of facetia, that is blown about the shores of more solid matter. They feed largely—on wind—only to become more hollow, like a rubber bag, into which the more you blow the greater is its emptiness. Thousands who have no time for Tyndall or Lockyer, are assiduous nibblers at an empty Cobb, and fill themselves to depletion with *Saturday Night* and the *New York Weekly*, or other trash too vile to name. And yet, I know a man who, in the absence of better guides, learned the whole theory and application of the spectroscopic, from the mere dust and drift of knowledge caught in the crevices of the daily newspaper; and that, too, in spite of the ridiculous blunders of the unscientific office boy, who is left to set up such unimportant matter?

A curiosity that seeks the worthless will find an ample field for its foraging; but, even in that pasture, a curiosity that looks on for what is edifying and valuable, will see much to keep awake, if not to satisfy, its appetite. On some chance occasion, you will astonish your neighbor with the number of good things you have picked up, at odd times, from his "Ledger," though he has cheated night and Sunday in devotion to its astonishing narratives, where the more he reads the less he knows.

Minds have their elective affinities, no less than chemicals, and draw to themselves the elements that build up their structure. As different animals find different food in the same pasture, diverse natures get what they want from the same field, and ignore the rest.

The ass is fabled to regale himself on thistles from stupid preference, and you may see, in fact, on any cold day, the city goats feeding luxuriously upon brown paper and rags, on old ash-heaps, disputing a dinner with their biped brother of the hook and bag. But none of the ill-fed fraternity make such innutritious selections as do the victims of vulgar curiosity. The thistle is ambrosia and the ass an epicure, street garbage a luxury, and the goat a gourmand, compared with the feed and feasters, among the moral rags and filth of the press and the village gossip shops, be they stores or bar-rooms. The scavenger instinct is so wide few escape it wholly. A story that outrages decency and defames virtue, has no rival in interest but the same thing with a murder attachment. Men will give a dollar for the paper that reeks with it, who would not give a penny for the last essay of Emerson, or lecture of Tyndall.

The little follies that could be drawn piecemeal through a key-hole by the hook of the moral scavenger, have higher attractions to the popular fancy than if they lay wide open to universal observation, and just in proportion as a secret is utterly without value to any mind, is it precious to the mind of vulgar curiosity.

Could some subtle chemist of the brain find out the missing ingredient,—phosphorus, or nitrogen, or impalpable chlorine, that could transform this idle faculty into genuine love of knowledge, he would set such a power at work in the realm of fact, that, were nature less than infinite, she would go into bankruptcy for want of means to honor its drafts. The French savant who proposes to make philosophers of idiots, by injecting phosphoric acid into their skulls, should try his skill on these curious people, who know everything, but that which is worth knowing.