

## DEMOCRACY IN LITERATURE.

IN rapid sequence to the triumph of democracy over political and social conditions, the demand that literature also should submit to its authority is made. Some American critics have lately felt obliged to apologize for Longfellow's scholarly refinement as not being sufficiently in sympathy with the wants of the people. A similar charge, has been brought against Lowell. "Intense patriotism," says one, "does not wholly atone for the assumption of an extra-American, or quasi-European superiority of experience. . . . Plain, unlettered labourers in the fields and woods do not relish the apparition of a man in dress coat and kid gloves in their midst assuming to do their literature for them."

It is impossible to believe that Mr. Maurice Thompson, from whose clever and interesting article, "On the Sixth Sense in Literature," the above sentences are taken, would seriously contend that literature in the future must adapt itself to the taste of "unlettered labourers in the fields and woods," or anywhere else; but such utterances, clap-trap though they may be, show the prevailing tendency of American criticism. Mr. Howells, in *Harpers' "Studies,"* speaks still more plainly. "The penetrating spirit of democracy," he says, "has found its expression in the very quality of literature. The old oligarchic republic of letters is passing away; already we have glimpses of the commune."

We know that democratic France at present possesses such a literature as might well have been bred in the Commune which produced the terrible *petroleuse* and other forms of horror; a literature in which the worst vices, diseases and deformities of debased humanity are employed in the service of a degraded art, and of which M. Emile Zola is the great high priest. It is unnecessary to enlarge here on the polluting effect such a literature must have on the imagination (so powerful a factor in the sphere of morals); it is so clearly recognized that a London bookseller of note, Mr. Vizetelly, has been lately sentenced to three months' imprisonment for selling M. Zola's novels. But there is another sort of democratic, or, if Mr. Howells pleases, communistic, literature which, though immaculate from a moral point of view, must inevitably degrade the taste, lower the standard of art, and prove fatal to all elevation of mind and all noble ambition. In this sort of literature Mr. Howells is *facile princeps*.

This popular novelist began his literary career as a poet, and one who assumes to know all about him tells us that a rare and original genius for poetry was silenced when Mr. Howells ceased to sing. This assertion has to be taken on trust by most of us, as his poems are apparently little known and never quoted. At all events, he found that poetry would not give him a living, and therefore came to the conclusion that its day had gone by, and it was now, in fact, only another name for emptiness—whether of his own purse, or of joy for the world, is not stated. It was therefore clear to him that under the reign of democracy the only true and living art must be realistic, or, as he has presented it to us, the prosaic details of commonplace life, with every vestige of poetry carefully eliminated. To this theory and practice he has steadily adhered, and has become so completely its slave that each successive book he produces is more paltry and insignificant in its incidents, more tedious and trivial in its talk, and more dull and disagreeable in its characters, till in his last novel, "Annie Kilburn," he seems to have sunk to the lowest level of all that is mean and uninteresting. An admirer, in reviewing this book, assumes that his aim is to make his readers "explorers in the desert of the commonplace for green oases;" but our accusation against Mr. Howells is that he gives us no green oases, but keeps us always in the sandy desert. Annie Kilburn, at any rate, found none in Hathboro', and neither will the readers of her doleful story. And the people of Hathboro' are only a little more vulgar and disagreeable than those with whom we are condemned to associate in the whole series of Mr. Howells' so-called realistic novels. They all dwell together on the broad plane of the dullest mediocrity. Not one among them could excite admiration or sympathy from the most catholic lover of his kind, only at the best a compassionate tolerance or a pity more akin to disgust than to love. Worlds away as Mr. Howells' representation of life is from M. Zola's theory of realistic art, or Count Tolstoi's tragic stories of oppression and cruelty, it appears to me as thoroughly pessimistic in its tendency. His novels, if accepted as true pictures of the best that life can give, could scarcely fail to check all aspirations after the higher possibilities of existence, without which life would certainly not be worth living. "Those who live with mean people think the world mean," Emerson says. Mean books are as lowering as mean society, and all books are mean that do not make us think nobly of human nature and the heights to which it may attain.

We are told by the admirers of democracy that now, at last, the people hold their proper place in literature. Aristocracy is crushed, and art is made subservient to the "enthusiasm of humanity." But when we consider the humanity represented in realistic novels, and the human specimens there portrayed, it seems as if the people might well rise up in just indignation, and claim damages for a series of the grossest libels. If we go back to the old days before democracy in literature was heard of, we shall find them treated very differently. The masters of fiction now looked upon as benighted aristocrats depicted the working classes with a just and generous appreciation that gained for them the respect and sympathy of every reader. Sir

Walter Scott drew his burghers, shepherds, fishermen, farmers and ploughboys from the life. He had gone familiarly among them from childhood, knew their homes and their ways, and, sturdy old aristocrat as he was, all his life spoke to every man he met as to his brother. He understood them thoroughly, and while discerning with keen and penetrating insight their inevitable defects and prejudices, delighted in doing justice to their many fine traits of character. He brings before us Dandie Dinmont's manliness, honesty and good feeling, and his simple, kindly household, with all the power of truth and nature. His genial and kindly humour revelled in the portrayal of such characters as Baillie Nicol Jarvie, Cuddie Headrigg, Andrew Fair-service and Edie Ochiltree, with all their amusing oddities, absurdities and selfish shrewdness. He has given us a host of such characters, depicted with that kindly indulgence and humorous sympathy which only the truest insight teaches, making them all excellent company in their way. So truly does he discern the soul of goodness in all things that even in his rogues and vagabonds he finds some redeeming touch of better things. And in his pathos or his mirth, he never forgets to render high honour to those simple heroic souls that

Follow with allegiance a fallen lord,  
And earn a place in the story.

Old Janet's protecting care for the Baron in his Patmos; Evan Dhu's devotion to the chief who had brought him to the scaffold; Dominie Sampson's faithfulness to his ruined master's children; the wild love of Meg Merrilies for Harry Bertram came straight from Scott's heart. His deepest power of pathos is drawn forth in the scene where the Antiquary comes on Saunders Mucklebackit trying to patch up the boat in which his fine young son Steenie was drowned. The heroine above all others whom he seem to have painted *con amore* was Jeanie Deans, a bare-footed Scotch lassie drawn from real life. In all his pictures of humble life, true as they are to nature, and various as their circumstances are, there is nothing to revolt or disgust, or lower our estimate of human nature. He makes his readers as much interested in them, as he himself was in his work-people and poor neighbours, and speaking out of the depths of his own knowledge and experience, he unconsciously gives lessons to us all on the great truths which he so unaffectedly and thoroughly recognised, the common brotherhood of all mankind.

Scott painted his princes with the same, powerful pen that portrayed his peasants. No one except Shakespeare has given us such graphic portraits of kings and queens, knights and nobles and ladies of high degree. But wonderful as his historical portraits are, they are still only studies from history, vivified by his imagination, while his peasants were drawn from true life, and not only life-like, but actually living on the pages. He could paint both high and low, the king and cadger, the queen and the fisher-wife, with truth and vigour. Dickens could only paint the people, for whom he used to say he held a brief. We know that the whimsical fancies, the quaint garb in which he so often draped his favourite characters, have made some modern critics accuse him of melodrama and false sentiment, and even deny that he had any title to genius except his marvellous gift of humour. Happily there are still many who can appreciate his power over all the emotions that move the heart, and can feel how ably he employed it in his client's cause. If he had done nothing more than create the Peggotty group—Clara Peggotty, old Daniel and young Hans—he would have deserved a high place among the great ones who teach us to "think nobly of the soul;" for in those three characters he has shown with unerring touch, the height and grandeur of virtue to which simple human nature may attain.

George Eliot, another great novelist who wrote before democracy in literature became a cult, took her finest characters from the working classes, and described the pious, dutiful, elevated lives she had known in their homes with a truth and beauty all England acknowledged.

The writings of those great spirits and fine artists strongly impress us with the truth that beauty and virtue are more real and permanent parts of nature and life than vice and ugliness, and for this reason they will always have the finest uses for humanity, being good for hope, for healing, for the strengthening, and ennobling of men and women.

In a later article than the one quoted above, Mr. Howells tells us with authority—"The truth is—and from time to time the scribbling race had better face it—there is no very deep, no very wide interest in even the greatest of authors. . . . There are moments," he says, "when Shakespeare seems essential to the young life, but he is not really so; and if the elder life will be honest, it will own that he is not at all important to it." He generously assures us that, in saying so, he has no wish to "abolish or supersede Shakespeare [the italics are the present writer's]; he only desires to make literary men recognise the fact that nothing, except, perhaps, the deceitfulness of riches, is so illusive as the supposition of interest in literature on the part of other men. . . . They are not altogether to blame for this," he says: "they are very little to blame, in fact, for it is only in the rarest instances that literature has come home to their business and bosoms. . . . It appeals to the taste, the aesthetic pride, the intellectuality of the reader; these are not his real life, and so it presently perishes out of him again to be utterly forgotten."

We may reasonably suppose that by "literature which comes home to men's business and bosoms," Mr. Howells means fiction employed on the average lives of average

men and women, their business affairs, their domestic concerns the familiar matters of daily life. Yet the best evidence of the ephemeral interests, and little real value of such literature is to be found in the fact that time so speedily consigns it to oblivion; except in one or two instances of unique genius. It is the literature that brings before us with truth and power men in those aspects of greatness which raise them above the crowd, and show us the height to which human nature may attain, that is immortal; not that which describes their successes or failures in business, their flirtations with vulgar women, their marital quarrels, or their social difficulties. The books which live for ever are those which we follow with breathless interest—the fortunes of such heroic hearts as Robinson Crusoe making for himself a little kingdom and obedient subjects of his desert island and its wild creatures; Monte Christo escaping from his prison; Amyas Leigh throwing his sword into the sea; Skimmer of the seas giving that last "ahoy" to his matchless Water Witch, and the sails, like sentient beings, fluttering at the sound; or the great tragedies of love and anguish, like the *Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Scarlet Letter*, or that wonderful book in which the bewitching picture of the gipsy Esmeralda and her little white goat dancing to the sound of the tambourine is so quickly followed by her terrible death on the scaffold, the victim of others' crimes and cruelties, and as innocent and helpless amidst them all as the moth that perishes in the flame of the candle. The genius that creates such scenes and characters can only die when time is no more.

Novels that confine us to the trivial round of commonplace lives soon pass away, though a fetish, or a fashion, may give them a brief popularity, but novels that lift us into a higher atmosphere of thought and action, rank, though in a lower degree, with the plays of Shakespeare, and other dramatists, and no criticism can stale or wither their perennial power and beauty. Mr. Howells, indeed, informs us that Shakespeare is of no importance in the lives of men. This dictum, in effect, includes the whole of that imaginative literature in which the poetry that preserves the divinity in man from decay is enshrined. It is difficult to believe that he is sincere in making such an assertion. Let us imagine if we can, a state of things in which Homer, *Æschylus*, Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe, were suddenly *abolished*, and their works forgotten as if they had never been. Who could estimate the impoverishment, the great rift and chasm in the sphere of ideas and emotions—that is in the soul of man—that would follow? Then let us suppose that great literature of the past superseded by the realistic or communal literature of whose approaching reign Mr. Howells has sounded the note! Such a revolution in literature and all that it implies, can only be compared to the destruction of Imperial Rome and its civilization by the Barbarians! However, there will be one compensation. It will *abolish* Mr. Donnelly and the Baconites.

LOUISA MURRAY.

## AT THE BASILICA, OTTAWA.

SHADES of twilight, deep'ning, dark'ning—

With the shadows entered we,  
Wearied of the city's murmur,  
Longing for tranquillity;  
Soft we entered, and the shadows  
Wrapt us round as noiselessly.

Silence! brooding hearts are beating  
Underneath the censer's glow;  
Pictured faces from the panels,  
In the dumbness of their woe,  
Act again the scene enacted  
Eighteen hundred years ago.

Silence—solemn, deep, and holy;  
Unseen wings are hovering o'er,  
Unseen hands are bearing cooling  
Unto hearts that burned before;  
Unseen lips are whispering softly  
"God is peace for evermore!"

Not a sound the silence breaketh  
But a father flitting by,  
With his soutane's silken rustle,  
Where the sombre shadows lie;  
Not a sound—save God's low whisper  
And the soul's responding cry.

EMILY McMANUS.

## LONDON LETTER.

THE long stretch of garden at Gray's Inn was empty this brilliant summer morning. Branching trees shaded low seats, set near to the straight gravel paths. Birds flying low in and out of the sunshine were the only occupants of the pretty old enclosure, which, wanting but the tinkle and splash of some of Lamb's loved fountains ("the fashion, they tell me, is gone by, and these things are esteemed childish"), is the quaintest of the London backwaters. Like the Peri at the gate of Paradise, I stood disconsolate on the scorching pavement, looking through the iron railings on to the cool green lengths of lawn beyond; for unless armed with an order from the steward's office it is impossible that strangers can be allowed in the sacred precincts, and the hour unfortunately had passed for the giving out of these permissions. The porter, shut up in his flowery cottage, was taking a siesta, I suppose: at any