

READINGS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

THE SUNBURNT POET.

To win the Theban prize each brought his ode,
When, lo! a stranger stood, wind-flusht and brown,
Who sang the wondrous world and claimed the crown;
But high gods sing in a forgotten mode.
Then cried he, soaring high—his bright feet shod
With Day that quenched the day and hid the town—
"Ye spurn Apollo as a sunburnt clown,
Ye pallid priestlings of a sunburnt god!"

'Twas Phœbus' self. And now he welcomes thee,
England's brave Burton, dowered of sun and wind,
Whose songs were born in deserts fierce and free,
Mid dusky Bedouins, Mongols yellow-skinned,
In Amazonian woods, in winds of Ind,
And on the breast of Camoens' mother-sea.

—Theodore Watts, in *The Athenæum*.

THE ENGLAND OF QUEEN ELIZABETH.

COMMERCE was crippled by monopolies, and of the arable land of the country not more than one-fourth was in a state of cultivation; but large flocks of sheep were kept on account of their wool. Manufactures were only in their infancy. Woollens had been spun and woven only on a small scale throughout the country; Taunton, in Somersetshire, being at that time the most famous for its fabrics of any town in England; and the West of England was to the world's commerce of that day what the North is now. While Liverpool was still a swamp, and Manchester a straggling hamlet, when Leeds was a cluster of mud huts, and the romantic valley of the Calder a desolate gorge, the streets of Taunton, Exeter, and Dunstons resounded with arts and industry, and the merchant ships of Bridgewater and Bristol were going out or coming in from the remotest corners of the globe. The fairest fields, the richest cities, the proudest strongholds lay in this region. The silk manufacture had been established in London upwards of two hundred years; but as yet upwards of a century and a half must elapse before an adventurous John Lombe erects a silk mill at Derby, and so begins the factory system in England. And that mighty cotton manufacture, upon whose prosperity the feeding of so many millions of people depends, at the birth of Shakespeare had no existence in the realm. Our principal foreign transactions then lay with the Netherlands; but already the merchant princes of our island were seeking to bind us in the peaceful links of commerce with all lands. Agriculture was then in the rudest condition; the flower-garden was but little cultivated, the parks of the nobility and gentry serving them for pleasure grounds; some valuable excellent herbs and fruits had indeed been recently introduced into the country, amongst which were turnips, carrots, salads, apricots, melons, and currants, but potatoes were not yet cultivated in Britain, and even for a hundred years afterwards were scarcely known as an article of food; and peas were in general brought from Holland, so that old Fuller might well observe that they were "fit dainties for ladies, they came so far and cost so dear." The cultivation of flax was not neglected, that of hops had been introduced, but as yet our principal supply was from the Low Countries. The old dungeon-like castles of the nobility were giving way to the more commodious halls or mansions, but the houses of the people improved slowly. The art of manufacturing the very coarsest sorts of glass had only been introduced into England seven years, common window-glass and bottles being all that was attempted, the finer articles of glassware being still imported from Venice. Few houses had glass in their windows, and even in towns of importance chimneys were an unknown luxury, the smoke being allowed to escape as best it could from the lattice, from the door, or from openings in the roofs. On a humble pallet of straw would the poor husbandman repose his wearied limbs, and wheaten bread was not used by more than one-half of the population.—From "*Shakespeare's True Life*," By James Walter, Longmans.

VELAZQUEZ UNDER NATURE'S GUIDANCE.

HE discovered also that Nature herself is the artist's best teacher, and industry his sweet guide to perfection. He very early resolved neither to sketch nor to colour any object without having the thing itself before him. That he might have a model of the human countenance ever at hand, "he kept," says Pacheco, "a peasant lad, as an apprentice, who served him for a study in different actions and postures—sometimes crying, sometimes laughing—till he had grappled with every difficulty of expression; and from him he executed an infinite variety of heads in charcoal and chalk, on blue paper, by which he arrived at certainty in taking likenesses." He thus laid the foundation of the inimitable ease and perfection with which he afterwards painted heads, in which his excellence was admitted even by his detractors, in a precious piece of criticism often in their mouths—that he could paint a head and nothing else. To this, when it was once repeated to him by Philip IV., he replied, with the noble humility of a great master and the good-humour which most effectually turns the edge of sarcasm, that they flattered him, for he knew nobody of whom it could be said that he painted a head thoroughly well. To acquire facility and brilliancy in colouring he devoted himself for a while to the study of

animals and still life, painting all sorts of objects rich in tones and tints, and simple in configuration, such as pieces of plate, metal and earthen pots and pans, and other domestic utensils, and the birds, fish, and fruits, which the woods and waters around Seville so lavishly supplied to its markets. These "bodegones" of his early days are worthy of the best pencils of Flanders, and now are no less rare than excellent.

The next steps of Velazquez, in his progress of self-instruction, was the study of subjects of low life, found in such rich and picturesque variety in the streets and on the waysides of Andalusia, to which he brought a fine sense of humour and discrimination of character. To this epoch is referred his celebrated picture of the "Water-carrier of Seville," stolen by King Joseph in his flight from the Palace of Madrid, and taken in his carriage, with a quantity of the Bourbon plate and jewels, at the rout of Vittoria. Presented by King Ferdinand VII. to the great English captain who placed him on his hereditary throne, it is now [1848] one of the Wellington trophies at Apsley House. It is a composition of three figures: a sunburnt, wayworn seller of water, dressed in a tattered brown jerkin, with his huge earthen jars, and two lads, one of whom receives a sparkling glass of the pure element, whilst his companion quenches his thirst from a pipkin. The execution of the heads and all the details is perfect; and the ragged trader, dispensing a few maravedio worth of his simple stock, maintains, during the transaction, a grave dignity of deportment, highly Spanish and characteristic, and worthy of an Emperor pledging a great vassal in Tokay.—*Annals of the Artists of Spain*. By Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, Bart. New Edition.

SELF-EXAMINATION.

LET not soft slumbers close my eyes,
Before I've recollected thrice
The train of actions through the day:
Where have my feet marked out their way?
What have I learnt, where'er I've been,
From all I've heard—from all I've seen?
What know I more that's worth the knowing?
What have I done that's worth the doing?
What have I sought that I should shun?
What duties have I left undone?
Or into what new follies run?
These self-enquiries are the road
That leads to virtue and to God.

—From the *Greek of Pythagoras*.

THE SISAL PLANT.

THE leaves are of a dull-green colour, four to six feet long, as many inches wide, and terminated by a stout, dark spine. The margins are commonly described as smooth, as they are without teeth, but in all the plants examined by the writer the leaves were slightly rough on the edges, and in many of the young plants some of the leaves had well-developed teeth. A full-grown plant presents a rather striking appearance, bristling all over with the long, spiny-tipped leaves, thickly radiating from the short cylindrical trunk, which is crowned by a sharp, slender, cone-like bud. Indeed, a large plant makes one think of a gigantic sea-urchin. The leaves as they unfold from the bud slowly assume a horizontal position, but remain rigid and straight, never curving downward, as they do in the century plant. When the plant arrives at maturity, and has a sufficient store of nourishment, it sends up its flower-stem, known to cultivators as the "mast" or "pole." This is from twenty to twenty-five feet high, and about six inches in diameter near the base. On the upper two thirds, branches are developed, converting the pole into a huge panicle, covered with innumerable greenish-yellow flowers. A peculiarity of the sisal plant is that it seldom or never sets a seed. The flowers fall, carrying the ovary with them, then on the ends of the branches young plants develop, so that the pole presents a rather odd appearance, with the small plants growing out in the places usually occupied by the flowers. When these young plants have attained a height of from three to four inches, they fall to the ground and take root. The old plants also reproduce themselves by means of suckers, and hence, when old and neglected, are often seen surrounded by numerous smaller ones, as in the common houseleek (*Sempervivum*).—From *Cultivation of Sisal in the Bahamas*, by John I. Northrop, in the *Popular Science Monthly*.

THACKERAY AND IRISHMEN.

IT was on the same day that a broken-down Irish gentleman, not unlike the great Costigan, fell into talk without being introduced. His brogue was thick and noble, and after a time he said: "Ye might not believe it, Sorr, but I'm an Irishman."—"Good heavens! You don't say so!" answered Thackeray. "I took you for an Italian." This playful love of Ireland and the Irish was for ever with Thackeray, and many of his Irish ballads are little less racy of the soil than Lever's own. But it was not understood, as he always felt he never was. His good-tempered banter was set down as mockery, and one day, in Anthony Trollope's stables, a curious old groom who heard Thackeray's name said to him: "I hear you have written a book upon Ireland, and are always making fun of the Irish. You don't like us."—"God help me!"

said Thackeray, turning his head away as his eyes filled with tears; "all that I have loved best in the world is Irish." Much did he love to talk of Irish oddities, and during his American lectures was delighted to tell how, dining at St. Louis, he overheard one Irish waiter say to another: "Do you know who that is?" "No," was the answer. "That," said the first, "is the celebrated Thacker." "What's he done?" "D—d if I know."—*Life of W. M. Thackeray*, by H. Merivale and H. T. Marzials.

FRESH JOHNSON ANECDOTES.

AT Dunvegan, Miss Macleod, of Macleod, who remembers her grandmother, Johnson's hostess, and her aunts, "the four daughters, who knew all the arts of Southern elegance, and all the modes of English economy," has preserved some traditions more worthy of trust. "One day," she said, "he had scolded the maid for not getting good peats, and had gone out in the rain to the stack to fetch in some himself. He caught a bad cold. Lady Macleod went up to his room to see how he was, and found him in bed with his wig turned inside out and the wrong end foremost, serving the purpose of 'a cap by night,' like the stocking of Goldsmith's 'Author.' On her return to the drawing-room she said: 'I have often seen very plain people, but anything as ugly as Dr. Johnson with his wig thus stuck on I have never seen.'" An elderly man, a retired exciseman, who lived close by, had a story to tell of the learned minister, the Rev. Donald Macqueen, who accompanied Johnson on part of his tour. A crofter, seeing the two men pass, asked the minister who was his companion. Macqueen replied: "The man who made the English language." "Then he had very little to do," rejoined the crofter; meaning, according to the Gaelic idiom, that he might have been better employed.—*Footsteps of Dr. Johnson*. By Geo. Birkbeck Hall. Sampson Low and Company.

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