

## SAUNTERINGS.

PERHAPS nothing is more characteristic of the movement in fiction of the last decade than its vigorous trend in the direction of translations. The foreign element in the fiction of the average country-town public library used to consist almost exclusively of "Les Misérables" and "Selections" from Balzac, with possibly a translation of "Manon Lescaut" which had slipped in by the inadvertence of the board of directors, or the somewhat limited acquaintance enjoyed by these gentlemen with the French classics. Perhaps it is not much better now, for the country-town library is slow of assimilation and its directorate apt to be of the opinion that all foreign literary matter emanates directly from the devil; but there is at least the opportunity to-day for its shelves to be replenished with the very boldest and best of the novelists working under the various independent theories of their age and country. The readers of such libraries may lay themselves under the spell of almost the whole of the incomparable "Comédie Humaine"; they may know the grace and penetrating charm of Daudet; the throbbing realism of Flaubert; may read between the lines all the subtle philosophy of Georges Sand in the light of her passionate life. A whole new set of ethics in fiction may be revealed to them in the novels of Tolstoi. Tourgenieff they had in English before, and half a dozen other notable Russians are available in French. These two great foreign schools absorb three quarters of the interest of the reading public, but the thought of any number of isolated novelists belonging to other countries reaches our public—of Germany, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, even of Japan. Popular interest in books of this sort has risen to a height which must astonish the publishers, accustomed as they have been to find a prejudice instead, arising from the unfamiliar names, the unrecognizable social situations, the foreign character-ideals of other than Anglo-Saxon fiction makers. The average novel reader likes above all a book in which his imagination will permit him to feel at home, a book in which the people talk as he would like to have talked, and act as he would like to have acted, and a book which makes any number of sacrifices of the probabilities in order to arrive at an orthodox and comfortable conclusion. At least, that is what the average novel reader used to like. And he could not bear the foreign novel because he never could get into relation with it. But his taste appears to be undergoing a change—a conversion to catholicity.

This tendency to the introduction of foreign literature has been made the basis of an argument that deduces intellectual poverty at home. It is not a fair deduction. The last decade in England and America has produced no Balzacs or Tolstois yet recognized, but it must be remembered that Balzac and Tolstoi are of no decade, but each of his century. And we have plenty of native books that compare more than favourably with the minor foreign productions borne in to our shores on the wave that brings the greater ones. It is not necessary either to suppose that because people are reading foreign books they are not also reading home productions. There is no exclusive principle of that sort in literature. The more widely the taste of the people is developed in these matters the keener and readier their appreciation of the things which are at hand. It is certainly pleasanter, and I think juster, to attribute this new and growing interest to the love of travel which has been so increased by the cheap, quick and easy modern means of going abroad, to the object lessons of commerce which throw so strong a light upon domestic and social life other than ours, and to the expanding perception and delight in process which is one of the characteristics of the better literary taste of the age, and which is abundantly gratified in the observation of foreign methods.

Whatever its cause, the result of the admission of these new influences upon the minds of fiction-makers in English must be an interesting one. We have no business rashly to conclude that our novelists were subject to them before, in the original, with all the additional potency of the foreign vehicle for the foreign idea. If the average novelist is much of a linguist, his work, adorned as it often is with the most commonplace of conventional foreignisms, fails to show it. It would be much more reasonable to conclude that he is not usually a university graduate, by the same token and for much the same cause he is not usually versed in the languages. The average novel does not represent so much stock in popular interest to its author, upon the dividends of which he can enjoy American comforts at home and European luxuries abroad, pay his taxes and educate his family. A W. D. Howells may enchain the multitude, and go and live sumptuously in Florence on the income from his books, acquiring Italian enough to make him a critic of the poets of that country. A Robert Louis Stevenson may lead it with a torch into regions of psychical darkness unexplored before, and reap the wherewithal to travel to the United States and add all the various dialects of American to his list of lingual acquaintances. But W. D. Howells and Robert Louis Stevenson are not producers of the average novel. A fair type of that class might be taken from among working journalists, professors, lawyers or doctors, men whose efforts in fiction are put forth chiefly to supplement a main income from another source, and are not at all necessarily indicative of either the desire or the opportunity for lingual accomplishments. The work of an author of this class must be influenced more or less, according to his receptivity, by this new insight into foreign ideals and their treatment. He will miss the subtlest part of the art in the adaptation of the native word to the native uses, but the force of the central idea and the significance of the episodes that cluster about it cannot fail to impress him. The effect of this will not be found in any change of his human and other material, for the average novelist must employ, to be successful, always that which lies close to hand, but in the way in which he regards his material, and the use to which he puts it. And as the great body of society is more affected in

its principles and purposes by the average novel than it cares to admit, the effect there will also doubtless reward the observer.

It is not pleasant to note the more frequent occurrence of the novel with theological aims to serve. Before the prejudices awakened by "The New Antigone," in Roman Catholic interests, have quite subsided, comes *Robert Elsmere*, in the interests apparently of a kind of Christianity without Christ. This last book is of a literary stature to attract the attention of two such eminent critics as Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Andrew Lang, who have both reviewed it, although Mr. Lang's article does give one the impression that it was Mr. Gladstone's action in the matter that drew the later reviewer's wondering attention to the novel and led him to believe that it was worth while to record a different opinion. The theological romance always starts with a fair-seeming resemblance to all other romances. If the doctrinal bias of any of its people is disclosed, that of the author is not even hinted at until the reader is well under way, and has allowed himself the luxury of absorption in scenes and events that are new to him. Then by degrees is unfolded the motion of the book, at first almost casually, then with detectible system, finally with all the passionate sincerity of apostleship. And with conviction upon this point comes to the reader a sense of being treacherously used. He has taken up this romance in the belief, if he has gone to the trouble of believing anything about it, that it shares the prime purpose of all fiction to him, that of amusing the oft depressed human product of civilization. He wouldn't have objected to some large general aims of a lofty character in connection with the amusement, that he should be uplifted by contemplation of heroism or stirred by imaginary contact with generosity. But this interference with his own private and unassailable convictions of dogma, this gratuitous instruction in matters where he firmly believes his education complete, above all this trickery whereby he has been induced to enter an argument, in which there is no personal satisfaction in talking back, he very naturally resents. He leans back in his chair with an air of irritation, and says "Bah!" The interjection explains his state of mind, and it is not a pleasant state of mind to feel one's self liable to as the result of any chance romance that may form one's summer indulgence.

Mr. Lang's preference for taking his theology "neat" is a preference he shares with a good many people. One does not easily think of an essayist more popular in his likes and dislikes than Mr. Andrew Lang. As children object to finding a rhubarb powder in a teaspoonful of raspberry jam, so do we object to finding tenets *perdus* in the seductive pages of our romances. They are not easier to take that way either. As we remember of the other experience, the bitter always stays on our tongues to be swallowed at leisure, while the sweet is quite spoiled by the mixture.

Fiction seems determined to broaden its scope in all directions. Its encroaches upon metaphysical, scientific and economic ground within the last few years have been marked. Imagination alone would form most insufficient capital for the novelist of to-day. And it is quite excusable if in its exultant march forward an ambitious department of literature should take some false steps.

SARA J. DUNCAN.

## CORRESPONDENCE.

M'GILL UNIVERSITY.

To the Editor of THE WEEK:

SIR,—I am very glad that, at last, one of the Governors of McGill University has broken the silence with which that body has ever met criticism of their actions. Mr. Hague's letter is perhaps an augury of better days, when questions affecting the University will be frankly discussed and decided, as the balance of reason is, not as the prejudices or desires of one man dictate.

An outsider, to understand the government of McGill University, must know the Principal. He must see in him, not only the entertaining lecturer, the pleasant host, but the man of unusual ability, of great ambition, and unyielding will, the man who is able to call to his aid resources of tact and craft and shrewdness, which would be the making of any politician. Do not suppose that this is any fancy picture. Sir William himself once boasted, in a public address, that, had he accepted the invitation given him in his early manhood to enter the field of politics, he would have climbed into a position infinitely more lofty, in the eyes of the world, than the one he now holds. For forty years this man, who has had the moulding of the great University he presides over, has swayed it as completely as any despot ever ruled a people. Most of what he has done for it, he has done wisely. Such a man could not do otherwise. But now, new ideas of education are crystallizing into methods, and he clings to the old with the same intense conservatism that has made him conspicuous in natural science as the defender of threadbare theories. The man who broke up a united congregation, because the majority proposed the innovation of an organ, will not readily accept any reform so fraught, in his eyes, with risk as co-education.

Mr. Hague has explained what he thinks necessary of the constitution of the University as follows:—"The duties of the Governors are, in the first place, to administer the property, endowments, and finances of the College; secondly, to make appointments to all offices therein; and thirdly, to frame statutes for its government. Purely academic functions, and all matters relating to the educational work of the University, are in the hands of a much larger body, almost all of whom are distinguished educationalists."

He falls into a very obvious contradiction. Surely the appointment of professors, and the framing of University laws, are "purely academic functions," and should be within the jurisdiction of "the much larger body," known as the Corporation. Such a re-arrangement of powers, with