

Literature and Science.

MR. RUSKIN'S "MAY-DAY."

Is an article published in this magazine about a year ago, I was allowed to make some allusion to the treasures of art Mr. Ruskin has lavished upon a training college in London. This is the Whitelands College, King's Road, Chelsea, and within its walls Canon Faunthorpe and a band of assistants year by year turn out some of the most capable elementary schoolmistresses of whom the country can boast. It is indeed a pleasure for any one interested in elementary education to spend an hour or two at Whitelands—to see the hard work done so cheerfully by girls destined to whole lives of labour, to ascertain from the whole spirit of the place that duty well done is the root of cheerfulness, and to find that theories of education are so advanced in this country now, that in an establishment of this sort, where percentages of "passes" and other terrors of the education department are thought of so much, kindness between teachers and scholars is the first and the last motive power that is sought. I do not know precisely how Mr. Ruskin first was drawn to the Whitelands girls, but certain it is that he has long admired their college home from the bottom of his heart, as his gifts have well testified to all concerned in it.

Among the marks of his interest to be found in this quaint Chelsea house is a chalcidony tablet let into a wall of the chief study. This bears the art-critic's favourite motto, "To-day." Upon the text Mr. Ruskin has preached to young women the following little sermon: "The happiness of your life, and its power and its part and rank in earth or in heaven, depend on the way you pass your days now. They are not to be sad days, but they are to be in the deepest sense solemn days. See that no day passes in which you do not make yourself a better creature."

All the year round the students at Whitelands can glance at the "To-day" that hangs in their study; and their glances are full of affection, for Mr. Ruskin, his works, and his private letters to them, have made a sunlight in their habitation. And of all the "to-days" in the twelve months they remember their master, as they call him, specially on the 1st of May.

Five years ago Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Faunthorpe devised a surprise for the scholars of the college. On the 1st of May they were told, at an hour's notice, to procure each a handful of flowers, and to assemble in the largest room. They assembled, wondering; the very governesses were ignorant of the meeting's object. At the proper moment the principal announced to the students that Mr. Ruskin had resolved to revive in their midst the old and sweet festival of the May queen. Each girl was given a voting-paper.

On this she was required to write the name of the "likeablest and loveablest" among the junior students. The voting-papers were then collected by a governess, and the fortunate person indicated by the most votes was induced with a royal robe of white. Around her neck was thrown a chain of gold, bearing an emblematic cross of the same metal. The May queen was then presented with a complete set of Mr. Ruskin's works, bound in purple calf; and, after selecting for herself and her maids-of-honour a few of the volumes, she was required to hand the others to such of her companions as she could recommend for good qualities. And thereafter brief festivities of an improvised sort closed the coronation day. Her Majesty doffed her finery within a few hours of her ascending the throne, but remained for the year the college's May queen.

This simple but beautiful ceremony has grown to be a great power at Whitelands. Any girl entering the college knows that within a year from her becoming a student under Canon Faunthorpe the exhibition of truthful and kindly character may lead her to the coveted throne. The elected queen is directed by Mr. Ruskin to distribute her presents among the best of the elder students, and thus old and young are brought into sympathetic contact. When the queen has passed the throne, she becomes an accredited example of behaviour to her companions, and she has then an incentive on her part to still further development of character. Thus Mr. Ruskin has succeeded in bringing before the Whitelands students, in the most refined way, a lesson on the theme once beautifully dealt with by Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, who has written that "courtesies engentle humanity." Engentle—what an exquisite word!—one after Mr. Ruskin's own heart. It has been his own mission to engentle the lives of many by preaching beauty to be found in our common lives, no less than in the works of genius and the storehouses thereof.

On the first day, then, of the month of May, the sixth May queen was elected at the Chelsea College. The electors are forbidden to canvass the matter in any way before the appointment is made. As the first of May happens to be the festival of Saints Philip and James, a special service is held in the chapel, and very interesting it is, although the public is rigidly excluded from it. One hundred and fifty girls, all clad in white and flower-bedecked, fill the small but beautiful place of worship. "Girls," says Mr. Ruskin, "should be like daisies, nice and white, with an edge of red if you look close, making the ground bright wherever they are." Herein he echoes the words of Dan Chaucer:—

That of al floures in the mede
Manne love, I most the floures white and rede,
Such as men callen daysyes in our towne.

In the chapel this large choir of sweet voices from blossoming humanity makes the young May air glad, and through the painted window of St. Ursula the sun throws upon them "warm gales," that fall like a shadow of blessing. Ere the service concludes the principal delivers a pithy address on the forthcoming ceremony and its meanings. Then, at ten o'clock the students assemble in the lecture-room, where, after a reading or two, and perhaps another address, the voting-papers are filled up before the vacant throne. All the rooms bloom, but the fragrant days is a mass of flowers. The choice of the girls is generally a surprise to the governesses, who, confess, however, that it is always justified by results. When this choice has been announced, the queen-elect retires to be robed. The garment has of course been prepared by the authorities for a nobody, since it is obviously impossible to have foreseen what kind of a figure would fill it; but a wise simplicity of design makes the robe adaptable to most sizes. The royal potentate provides herself with three maids-of-honour, who assist her, during the robing, to make the list of those who are to receive her favours. At last she re-enters the assembly, crowned with a wreath of moss and marguerites, and bearing a floral sceptre. Before her step the youngest scholars, who bear on velvet cushions the books to be distributed. The very youngest girl of all carries the queen's crown and chain of gold. Each year these are designed anew by artists like Mr. Burne Jones or Mr. Arthur Severn. Thus the queen possesses and hands down for all time a unique specimen of nineteenth-century art.

The queen seated, her predecessor, now called a queen dowager, is placed by her side, wreathed in forget-me-nots; and the next matter of interest becomes the presentation of gifts. As Mr. Ruskin's nervous state precludes his attendance at any considerable gathering of his fellow-beings, some friend deputed by him invests the new potentate with her insignia of office. The queen next selects for herself, from among the precious books, "The Queen of the Air," reserving for her chief maid-of-honour "The Seven Lamps of Architecture;" and the other thirty volumes are handed to the chosen recipients with little encomiums from the throne. Part-songs follow, and high holiday is decreed to conclude the ceremony. We know not who may be this year's queen, but all accounts agree in stating that she must be a very winsome lass to eclipse in favour her five precursors. Three years ago a touching thing happened. The choice fell on the only girl present in black. She was mourning a dead father. The trembling maiden required some persuasion before she would consent to don the May queen's shining attire; and her first act after doffing it was to send off the pure white lilies that had surrounded her, to lie on her father's new-made grave.—*Eric S. Robertson in the Leisure Hour.*