

A FRAGMENT.

I wandered along on eastern hills
 When the year and the day and I
 Were young together; when all the world
 Seemed young, and that untold joy that thrills
 Swelled forth in a thousand morning songs
 Of sweet-voiced birds, and breathed from many a flower
 That bloomed in beauty where the gentle water purled.

In silence I wandered, but through my soul
 A wonderful music rung, that found no words;
 For 'twas but the answering strain
 To the voices of bird and wood and stream
 That mingled into one wide harmony,
 Finding an echo in my heart's quick pulse,
 A smile of gladness in the dew drop's golden beam.

THE DECAY OF FICTION.

A CYCLE of a century and a half has passed since the commencement of English fictitious literature. The appearance of Richardson's "Pamela," in 1740, is usually taken as the starting point of novel-writing in England. This work, and the novels of Fielding, Smollett, and their contemporaries, which followed closely upon it, and may be regarded as the outcome of "Pamela," stand apart in the history of literature as a group by themselves, second only in literary excellence to the productions of the earlier decades of the present century, of the era of Scott, Dickens and Thackeray. On a comparison of these works with the novels of our own day, we are struck at once by the marked difference, both in tone and in design. The former, we find, are careful and elaborate literary productions; the latter ephemeral effusions, written for a single generation and dying with it. The design of the older authors appears, upon examination, to have been to produce a work of real merit, one which should imitate in polish and excellence of detail the great models of epic and dramatic literature. Often, it is true, the execution falls far short of this design; but this design remains nevertheless. The productions of the present novel-writer, on the contrary, bear unmistakeable evidence of being written in diem, intended to awaken a transitory interest and then pass into oblivion. That there has been a great decay in the character of fictitious literature is only too evident. Were other proof wanting we could find an infallible one in the attitude of the reading public of the present day towards the matter that they read. The novel is regarded by them as a thing to be read fleetingly, a thing not to be remembered, and from which no intellectual or moral benefit is expected. The very parts of it which, in a novel of true literary standard, should contain the greatest excellence, the interspersed descriptions, delineations and learned or moral excursions of the author, are treated with scant courtesy, and left unread. The skipper blows a whiff from his pipe and passes on, thirsting for "something to happen." To ascertain the cause of this marked decay it is necessary to consider what are the essential parts necessary to fictitious composition.

There are in the machinery of fiction two main elements—the one of action, the other of reflection and depiction. To the former element belongs what is commonly termed the *plot* of the ordinary novel—the peculiar combination of incident by which the author seeks to fasten the reader's interest. To the latter pertains the depiction of natural scenery, the presentation of isolated incidents and attitudes contained in the general plot, the inculcation of the moral bearing of the whole and its parts, and, most of all, the vivid portrayal of the various phases of human character and human motives. It is at once plain that, in a perfect work of fiction, these two elements must be harmoniously and proportionately blended; the presentation of incident and the delineation of character must preserve

a balanced and mutual support. While the individuality of the characters furnishes the motives for the actions that constitute the plot, so the actions, apart from their intrinsic interest, should heighten and exemplify the coloring of the characters, and remain in consistent unison with them.

It is plain, too, that the first element, that of incident, is by far the easier of production. A plot, so-called, consisting only in an interesting combination of occurrences may be almost formed mechanically. Occurrences are, so to speak, known quantities: the author has a series of stock incidents ready to his hand. The course of true love, a rival's jealousy attendant upon it, a murder, a suicide, the inheritance of property, the recklessness of youthful prodigality and the ruin consequent upon it, or to descend to a still lower stratum, the narration of adventures and the genuine episodes of war, rendered interesting by their association with fictitious personages, may be cited as among the most usual incidents of the author's stock-in-trade. A certain number of these incidents being chosen, a definite and nominally original plot may be constructed by a process almost resembling the formation of an algebraical permutation.

The second element, that of character, is incomparably more difficult of treatment. Originality in the literal sense, is here impossible. An author who seeks to make his characters original, renders them unnatural, and, unless viewed from a grotesque point of view, uninteresting. Incidents become interesting from not being known as already existing; the depiction of character is interesting only when it properly presents and analyzes that which is already known and which exists. A detailed series of action can only claim our attention by its striking want of resemblance with that which we have already known and experienced; the sketching of character, on the other hand, acquires its force by the just delineation of the human mind and its motives as we ourselves have felt and seen them. Action in a word is objective, while character is subjective.

We can infer at once that this second element demands for its production a far higher literary and creative power than does the first. A mere tyro may, by the ingenious combination of startling and improbable incidents, produce a novel which will excite the reader's curiosity sufficiently to render it interesting. He may even call forth a feeling of morbid interest by the very exaggeration and unnaturalness of his plot, or by the abundant recourse to the supernatural and gruesome, which so many authors affect. But there is nothing fine or delicate in the production; authors' characters create no interest of themselves. It is only the actions in which they figure as units, on which the claim of the work to any interest or originality rests.

Now, it is precisely in the varying proportions of these two elements—action and depiction, as we have named them—that the difference between the older and modern system of fiction writing lies. As we go backward in time we find an increasing predominance of the second element. On examining a work of the earlier stamp we find that the author has directed almost all his attention on depiction or character-sketching. In a work of the middle era, the early part of this century, the two elements are harmoniously balanced, while in the ordinary novel of the present day the element of incident is found to almost totally exclude the delineation of character. Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield" may be taken as a fair type of a work of the first-class. Here we find the incident or plot of the story reduced to the simplest form possible; considered in itself and apart from the masterly portrayal of character which forms the real essence of the book, it would fail entirely to excite our interest. The every-day life of a country parson, his chats with his neighbours and consultations with his wife on the rearing of his children, constitute as commonplace and unexciting a subject as can be imagined. Yet with what a poetic beauty does the skilful pen of the novelist envelop the simple Vicar and his quiet