

Notes on English Literature.

BY ELEANOR ROBINSON.

Cranford.

Notes and suggestions for teaching "Cranford": I hardly know whether to be more dismayed or amused at the task of telling any one how to teach "Cranford." Can a book like this be "taught"? What can we want our pupils to learn about such a book? Nothing, surely, but to love it. And for that, let them read and read and re-read it. If you love it yourself, and read it with them, dwelling on your favourite bits of it, letting your genuine pleasure be quietly evident, some of them are sure to find it to their liking, and to profit in mind and heart by getting familiar with such a true and charming picture of life. If you do not, yourself, know it well enough to delight in it, still read it with them, bringing to your reading the patient and humble mind which we must all bring to our communion with good books.

I am tempted to quote the words of a famous teacher on this subject.

"The thing is to have the pupils with the teacher's help and guidance, commune with the author while in class, and quietly drink in the sense and spirit of his workmanship. Such communing together of teacher and pupils with the mind of a good book cannot but be highly fruitful to them both; an interplay of fine sympathies and inspirations will soon spring up between them, and pleasant surprises of truth and good will be stealing over them. . . . Unless I can get the pupil to be happy in such communion, I am unhappy myself; and this, I suppose, because it is naturally unpleasant to see people standing in the presence and repeating the words of that which is good, and tasting no sweetness therein. For 'what is noble should be sweet,' and ought, if possible, to be bound up with none but pleasant associations; that so delight and love may hold the mind in perpetual communion with the springs of health and joy."—Henry Hudson.

So I should try to read "Cranford" straight through with the class, as sympathetically as possible. I should set no formal exercises, and ask no questions except such as rise naturally out of the reading. Very little explanation of words, references, or allusions will be necessary. I think that some of the qualities of the book that I should try to lead the pupils to feel—not necessarily to name—are these:

I. The very wonderful truthfulness of the characterization. The people all have their faults and foibles, some of them are very petty, some generous and noble, but none are perfect, none are wicked.

II. The loving spirit in which they are described. Their creator sees all their oddities, inconsistencies, and little pretences, and makes us smile at them, but never unkindly or bitterly.

III. The prominence given to *acts* of kindness and unselfishness.

IV. The skill with which the story-teller keeps herself in the background.

V. The keen observation shown by the writer.

VI. The number of incidents which "stand out clear and distinct, each with its own proper climax."—(See *introduction*).—Pupils may be asked to tell a striking incident, as an exercise in narration, but let them choose their incident for themselves.

A great deal of the humour which is inseparable from the narrative will be lost upon the children—there are few more curious and interesting experiments to try upon a class of children than to find out what does, or does not, strike them as amusing,—and they might be asked to pick out a passage that they think is funny.

Some will be interested in the depiction of manners, customs, dress, and so on. They ought to pick out the hints of the date of the story, and any references to public events.

Above all things, keep a "light hand" in reading and discussing, and do not give a formal examination on the book.

The story is told of a famous lady, who once reigned in Paris society, that she was so very homely that her mother said one day, "My poor child, you are too ugly for any one ever to fall in love with you." From that time Madame de Circourt began to be very kind to the pauper children of the village, the servants of the household, even the birds that hopped about the garden walks. She was always distressed if she happened to be unable to render a service.

This good-will toward everybody made her the idol of the city. Though her complexion was sallow, her grey eyes small and sunken, yet she held in devotion to her the greatest men of her time. Her unselfish interest in others made her, it is said, perfectly irresistible. Her life furnishes a valuable lesson.