

## GEORGE ELIOT.



UN the galaxy of English novelists, four names stand forth so prominently as to cast all others into an obscure background. These are Scott, Dickens, Thackeray and George Eliot. Of them all, Eliot, perhaps, will appeal most strongly to the sympathy of the general reader, primarily because she is a woman, but also because she embodies in her works the modern English philosophy of life.

A few words on the nature of her art, and a brief estimate of her philosophical notions will consequently be of interest.

George Eliot has won fame mainly by her novels. She wrote poetry, indeed, but in no great quantity and that not of the first order. Writers of fiction may be classed as society or character novelists, according as their works tend to give a general picture of social intercourse, or are made to bring one particular individual into the clearest light, leaving the other *dramatis personæ* to group themselves around this leading personage in such a way as to bring him into yet bolder relief. George Eliot belongs partly to each school, though, in general, it may be stated that individual characterization was more congenial to her genius than the delineation of social manners. The latter requires delicate coloring and a skillful hand to catch the varying tints of social life, but it is essentially surface work and calls for no probing perceptive power on the part of the artist. Society makes men and women artificial, and the society novelist has done his duty when he sets before us their quirks and smiles and quasi-gallantry. To tear off their masks and show them as they really are, to depict the secret workings of their passions, to make a psychological analysis of their natures, is the far more difficult task of the character novelist.

George Eliot was endowed in a high degree with two qualities seldom found in association. Imagination and deep speculative power, that fitted her to take a high place amongst the latter class of artists, whilst not entirely excluding her from the former. The speculative ben-

of her mind made her prefer the study of the heart to the portrayal of the airy nothings of the drawing-room, whilst her vivid imaginative powers made her creations real men and women and not metaphysical abstractions.

Each class of the novel is further determined as to its artistic merit by the morality it displays. The good and the beautiful are essentially one, and their divorce in the realms of art must prove disastrous, nay, destructive to artistic execution. Vice, unfortunately, is a feature of human life, and as such must find its representation in art, but it is not the main feature, and the artist who makes it so by cloaking its intrinsic ugliness with an alluring drapery is serving his readers with the husks of swine, when he might have given them the choicest produce of a land flowing with milk and honey. Almost as fatal, however, is the opposite extreme. The artist is not the preacher, and he may sin almost as grievously against artistic canons by pointing the moral too strongly as by being openly immoral. George Eliot's works have always a high moral tone and are almost invariably written with a direct moral purpose. The lesson in not a few of them is perhaps too obvious, though in this regard she has hardly merited the severe handling she has received from some critics. The morality she inculcates is, of course, based on natural religion, for being a materialist, she rejected the lofty principles of revelation. Yet, though an unbeliever, she was artist enough to perceive that materialism is of the earth earthly, and to know that the artistic value of her works would be immeasurably enhanced by the introduction of the religious element. She depicts religious motives with a clearness and force which is astonishing in one who herself had lost all personal perception of them. The character of Dinah, the female Methodist preacher in Adam Bede is a case in point.

As to her style, it has been objected that she is too much given to technical scientific terms, and it may be conceded that the form in which she has put her novels is such as to appeal rather to the cultured than to the illiterate.