

BOOK REVIEWS.

PROMINENT among the living writers of verse familiar to readers of American literature is the honoured name of Margaret J. Preston. Her fugitive verse seems, generally speaking, to have more than ephemeral significance and importance about it, and her collected poems furnish the text for genuine criticism and analysis, rare as it is delightful. Her latest volume, issued by Houghton, Mifflin and Co., contains a vast number of sonnets and of poems in the ballad metre.\* The sonnets are, for the most part, conceived in the spirit of the modern æsthetic school, recalling the experiments in that direction made by Mr. Oscar Wilde. Of these the best are "Keats' Greek Urn," "In the Uffizi Gallery," "Attar of Roses," and "Dante Gabriel Rossetti." Another sonnet, entitled "Circumstance," contains a figure of speech that reveals an endeavour to master those details of material existence so incomparably worked into Tennysonian literature.

Yet round each life there crowds an atmosphere  
Of strong environment for woe or weal,  
That proves to one a joyous fostering power;  
To one a fateful force subversive drear;  
As damps, that nurse to perfect bloom the flower,  
Rust to corrosion the elastic steel.

Richness and variety of mental culture are shown by another group of sonnets, in which such diversified subjects as old English churches, the genius of Philip Bourke Marston, Mendelssohn, Haydn, Bayard Taylor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and certain abstract ideas as "Horizons," "Art's Limitations," and "Human Providence," all receive vigorous and comparatively original treatment. Six sonnets, entitled "Medallion Heads," testify in their absolute perfection of form and delicacy of description to the author's rank as an æsthetic poet. Fourteen "Colonial Ballads" are written in the simple rhyming quatrain that Longfellow and Whittier have made so famous, and others before them. The most effective are naturally those which enshrine the best story, the most taking legend. One of these is undoubtedly the First Proclamation of Miles Standish, 1620, when upon the deck of the *Mayflower*, he ordered the Pilgrim Mothers

"On a Monday," the record says,  
To start for their new-found England  
The first of her washing-days.

"Do the thing that is next" saith the proverb,  
And a nobler shall yet succeed :—  
'Tis the motive exalts the action;  
'Tis the doing and not the deed;  
For the earliest act of the heroes  
Whose fame has a world-wide sway  
Was—to fashion a crane for a kettle,  
And order a washing day!

More pretentious are such noble poems as "Compensation," "Calling the Angels In," and "Even-Song," poems which recall the gentle utterances of Adelaide Procter, who first taught women how much there was to say about every-day life, its failures, achievements, and purposes, which could be so much better said "by women than by men." "Same-Sickness" is the very ugly title of a poem which reads altogether too much like Wordsworth's Ode to Immortality, and "Before Death" has been evidently suggested by Edwin Arnold's famous "After Death in Arabia," or else the following lines are simply an instance of that unconscious kleptomaniac propensity abroad at all seasons in the literary world :—

The spirit let loose from mortal bars,  
And somewhere away among the stars :

Perhaps the most charming, and certain to be the most popular little group of poems in this volume, is that entitled the "Childhood of the Old Masters." Bright with the warm, generous colouring of sunny Italy, and revealing the grace of those mediæval homes in Bologna, in Florence, in Freiburg, or at Rome, the different stories are told with rare charm of diction and much dramatic force. Gifted with a warm, enthusiastic temperament, a lively imagination, and a strong abiding belief in the greatness of Nature and of God, Mrs. Preston occupies a position midway between the writers of merely literary or æsthetic verse on the one hand, and the moulders of secular hymns and religious abstractions on the other. More sprightly, gay, entertaining, and widely read than Helen Hunt Jackson, and more serious, elevated, and spiritually-minded than Ella Wheeler Wilcox, she yet lacks the extreme sensitiveness and sentiment of the former highly impressionable soul, and the somewhat masculine, downright passionate directness of the latter's indubitably modern individuality.

From the same house comes a new, thoroughly revised and conveniently bound edition of "Rural Hours," a mixture of delightful field and forest gossip, literary chit-chat and philosophical meanderings from the pen of Susan Fenimore Cooper.† In the form of a diary, it indicates a profound acquaintance with both fauna and flora of North America, and an astonishing lot of information is given in an offhand, cheerful, thoroughly unpedantic strain which proclaims the author at once a woman of unusual acquirements and uncommon good sense. The "harvest of a quiet eye" and eager ear and cultured brain are all here in this one volume, which contains a remarkable account of the different aspects of the seasons, of the natural sequence of the flowers, of the habits of animals, of insects, reptiles, and birds, of the many incidents connected with farm and village life, spread over one year. In roaming by the side of stony brooks, wandering about in flower-decked fields, the appreciative and enthusiastic writer has

gleaned many seemingly trifling facts which are, however, afterwards remembered with keen pleasure, and reappear in this entertaining book for our comfort and delectation. She tells us how the wild bee, called the *upholstery* bee from its habits, lines her cell in the ground which she has bored herself with the petals of the scarlet poppy laid down for all the world like a carpet. In gathering a bunch of Cardinal-flower at the river side—the *Lobelia Cardinalis* of the botanists—she tells us that the Russian word for *beauty* and for *red* is said to be the same—*Krasnoi*—according to M. de Ségur. In walking through the deeply-yellowing woods of autumn she is reminded of the golden gardens of the Incas, in the vale of Cuzco. She gives at length a letter from Charles James Fox, on the subject of the nightingale, which ends in a quaint assertion to the effect that he finds such researches more to his taste than attending the House of Commons. She describes the country store as a place where you can buy at the same counter "kid gloves and a spade; a lace veil and a jug of molasses; a satin dress and a broom; looking-glasses, grass-seed, fire-irons, Valenciennes lace, butter and eggs, embroidery, blankets, candles, cheese and a fancy fan"—probably Japanese. Humour, vivacity, no inconsiderable literary experience and ability, a keen faculty of observation, and the restraining influence of a noble Christian mind render this book one of the most important of recent publications. It is inscribed very respectfully, gratefully and most affectionately to the author of the "Deerslayer." Originally written about 1868, the present edition closes with a couple of paragraphs dated 1886, and the last entry contains the remark that the European lark and nightingale may yet become members of our bird flock on this side the Atlantic. We are told that this is possible. The lark has been introduced into New Jersey and the nightingale into Virginia, with what success cannot yet be known.

Two of the "Story of the Nations" series lie before us, the "Story of Assyria" \* and the "Story of Alexander's Empire." † The real life of the ancient Macedonians and Assyrians has been fully entered into, and they are brought before our view as they actually lived, laboured, and struggled, as they ate and drank, fought, wrote, and amused themselves. The volumes will not be issued in strict chronological order, but when entirely completed will be expected to furnish a comprehensive and connected narrative of the chief events in the history of the world. It cannot be expected nor desired that such text-books, even though compiled by such writers as H. Jahnar Boyesen, S. Baring Gould, Sarah Jewett, Prof. Mahaffy and Hon. Emily Lawless, shall supersede the older and more minute historical compilations so long in use. We shall probably continue to turn to Grote for the best pictures of ancient Greece, and to Guizot for certain stormy episodes in the life of modern France, to Green, Alison, and Macaulay for other engrossing scenes in the histories of England and Europe. Still, the existence of these capitally condensed volumes will no doubt prove of immense value to the student and the professor, and by virtue of their easy style and handsome illustrations, even to the general reader. Excellent maps and indexes accompany each volume, and they are sold separately at \$1.50 each. It is needless to state that each volume is also a pattern of exquisite taste in paper, letter-press, and binding.

ANOTHER book on China! ‡ Happily, the author, James Harrison Wilson, late Maj.-General U. S. Army, etc., etc., foreseeing that it might be objected that there are already too many books on China, has taken the sensible course of telling us in his preface that the present volume has been written with a distinct end in view, namely, to treat of progress in that country, to endeavour to show, by statistics and all procurable data, what China and the Chinese were before foreign influences had materially changed them, what foreigners have done for or forced them to do and what remains for foreigners to do, with the prospect of their doing it. As a new field for American enterprise, skill, and capital, the writer went to China to try and see for himself whether or no that country is ready for railroads, canals, and other modern improvements. Gen. Wilson seems to have found a considerable difficulty in arriving at any correct estimate of individual wealth in China, nor has he been able to arrive at any accurate statement of the expenditures of the Chinese Government. In conference with a distinguished native, Li-Hung-Chang, First Grand Secretary of the Empire, who practically conducts the entire affairs of the nation, under the nominal rule of the energetic and peculiar Empress-Dowager, Gen. Wilson found that the chief obstacle in the way of starting furnaces, rolling-mills, railroads, mines, and canals, was the absence of ready money with which to pay for them. The Chinese are slow to lend to their Government, and the Government itself afraid to negotiate foreign loans. The conclusion of the matter is about this, that while their leading statesmen want railroads, and distinctly see how the country will be benefited by them, they are not willing to have them on terms which may possibly increase European influence in China. There is, even at this late day, a very great apathy in the "Middle Kingdom," and hundreds of Chinese youths who cross over to America to be educated, or spend long enough in England to become civilised, find, on their return to their native country, no places at their disposal, no posts awaiting them, and themselves regarded with indifference and distrust. Gen. Wilson's book will no doubt be read with much interest by us in Canada, and as a whole it can be honestly recommended as a painstaking survey of modern China from a purely American standpoint, though no admirer of "Chinese Gordon" will

\* "Alexander's Empire." Mahaffy. Story of the Nations.

† "Assyria." Ragozin. Story of the Nations. Putnam, New York and London; Williamson and Company, Toronto.

‡ "China: Travels and Investigations in the 'Middle Kingdom,' With a Glance at Japan." Wilson. Appleton and Company, New York.

\* "Colonial Ballads, Sonnets and Other Verse." Margaret J. Preston. Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York; Williamson and Company, Toronto.

† "Rural Hours." Susan Fenimore Cooper. Houghton, Mifflin and Company; Williamson and Company, Toronto.