

THE STUDY OF LITERATURE.

LITERATURE, its development, progress, and present condition is a study occupying no small place in our college curriculum. It is one of the most interesting and also one of the most important studies which we, as students, can enjoy. To drop some hard mathematical problem, or to step out from the winding, sinuous paths of some metaphysical question, and take up the study of a literary work, following the author as he skilfully shows us the passions, the desires, and the motives urging his characters on to the accomplishment of their object; noting the beauties and deficiencies of his style; and tracing the development of his plot; is as complete a rest from the harder and more abstruse questions of metaphysics and mathematics, as would be a complete cessation of all study.

This study is of no small importance, since by its means only can we hope to gain a knowledge of many other branches of study and investigation. It is the store-house in which has been treasured the gems of speculative and practical thought, in their settings of philosophy, science and art, and the hard crystals of experience, gained only after repeated trials, and made clear and bright only after much suffering and labour. It is the repository for all other learning and so is closely connected with other studies. The relation between literature and history is especially important. The literature of a country interprets, and is itself interpreted by the history of the country. There is a mutual interdependence between the two, and only by the study of both can a fair conclusion as to the merits of either be reached. So close is this interdependence that to study the literature of a country, to trace its gradual development and advancement, to detect its peculiarities and to notice the marked changes in its character, which from time to time have been manifested, is to study the history of that country; to watch its political progress, and its social improvement; and to learn of the wars, struggles and conflicts endured, and the peace, prosperity and happiness enjoyed by the nation. And *vice versa* history is essential to the study of literature.

To fully understand and appreciate a literary work we must have some acquaintance with the circumstances under which it was written; we must know something of the life, character and personal habits of

the author. All literary works are more or less tinged by the character of the author's every-day life, and a knowledge of its distinctive traits will often explain passages whose force and beauty would otherwise remain undiscovered. Much of the wild, weird beauty of "The Raven" would be unappreciated had we no knowledge of the life history of its gifted, but eccentric composer. Tennyson's most famous work, "In Memoriam," would lose its high place in the literature of the day, did we know nothing of English social life in the 19th century; and were we ignorant of its author's friendship for Arthur Henry Hallam; of his quiet retiring disposition; and of his abstraction from, and repugnance to the common-place expressions of grief.

The study of language is universally admitted to be one of the best means for training and developing the mental faculties. And this is included in the study of literature, for a knowledge of the peculiar characteristics of a language must be possessed, and the rules relating to the formation of sentences and the sequence of ideas fully understood and mastered, in order to appreciate and discriminate in regard to the literary style of any work.

The literature of an age gives a graphic picture of the manners, customs and habits of the people living in that age. The literature of England, during the supremacy of the commonwealth, was of a nature corresponding to the stern, unrelenting, pitiless character of the Puritan. We cannot imagine a light and gay literature being produced by a people abnormally grave, serious and thoughtful, whose character was austere, rigid and harsh. But, when, after the Restoration, the pent up force of public opinion burst its barriers and, unrestricted, roared madly and furiously across the country, overwhelming all virtue and morality, then we see a change in the literature. Instead of works of a serious and weighty but refined character, there is the opposite extreme—a literature coarse and sensual in which there is not the slightest regard for decency, and which indeed considers virtue and morality as illusions—something tainting too much of the puritanic spirit to be pleasing to those living under the new regime. The literature of an age is indeed "the sum and product of the national energy." It is "the reflex of the country's history,"—the mirror of public sentiment, and shows the characteristics of the nation more clearly than they can be discovered in any other way.