

THE SATURDAY READER.

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FIVE CENTS.

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Continued from week to week, the NEW STORY,
"BROUGHT TO LIGHT."

THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE.

THIS is a subject of deep interest to every human being of whatever sex or age, but especially to the young, and ought, therefore, to command the attention of the readers of our own light pages, as well as of those who delight in more abstruse studies and are engaged in more serious labours, or believe themselves to be so. We shall not, therefore, apologise for entering on a question which, at the first blush, may appear somewhat out of character with the objects of the *Saturday Reader*. Besides, as Rousseau warned persons of a certain class against the perusal of one of his works, so we, in humble imitation of such high literary authority, beg to hint that those who have no taste for these our present lucubrations, may skip them over, and seek metal more attractive in our succeeding columns, in which, as usual, such is to be found in profuse abundance. Thus, like the man in the play, we can exhibit our tediousness for the benefit of our special friends, and the party on the other part, as the lawyers say, has nothing to complain of.

We have been led to this subject by meeting in Prof. Goldwin Smith's recently published "Lectures on the Study of History," an account of the process by which public opinion is sometimes formed. In speaking of M. Comte's philosophical doctrines, he relates how several of his disciples were led into error by him, from ignorance of the circumstances under which these doctrines were produced and published. M. Comte, after having made many valuable additions to the science of mental philosophy betook himself, at last, to concocting a religion which was to replace the creeds of past, present and future times, and was to be universal or catholic, in the true sense of that word. It was to be scientific and simple, true, evident, and profound. His paradoxes were so specious at first that they received acceptance among a certain class of writers, Mr. Mill and Mr. Carlyle among the rest; but behold! the discovery was shortly made that the French Mahomet was insane* when he devised his Koran,

* Professor Smith, while doing full justice to Comte's genius in his better days, observes:—

There can scarcely be a doubt that Comte, toward the end of his life, by which time he had been abandoned by Mr. Mill and all his rational disciples, was insane. Nor is it difficult to detect the source of his insanity. It was egotism, uncontrolled by the thought of a higher power, and, in its morbid irritation, unsoothed by the influence of religion. The passage in which he says that having at first been only an Aristotle, he, through his affection for a female friend, became also a St. Paul, has been often quoted. But it is not a more rampant display of egotism than the passage at the beginning of his "Catechism," in which he depicts the memorable conclusion "of his course of lectures as the opening of a new era, and shows how the great thinkers who had preceded him in history were precursors of himself. In his later phase, having become a St. Paul, he proceeded to found a new religion, which is simply an insane parody of the Roman Catholicism before his eyes, sets a mystic morality above science, and turned the "Positive Philosophy" upside down.

and there was "a concatenation accordingly," as Tony Lumpkin would say. The disciples had, however, gone too far to recede with credit to themselves, when the fact became known; and M. Comte's crazy dreams are to this day embodied in their philosophical theories. So says Professor Smith, who is a philosopher of another school, and a sounder one, we have no doubt, for he prefers old truths to new fallacies. So also say others; but the Comtites insist their master was right to the extent they went with him, and that they left him when he wandered from the true path. That point they may settle among themselves; our object is to show how men are often led into error.

And this is one of the "signs of times." It is plain to the meanest capacity, that one of those periodical revolutions which have often taken place in the moral and religious world, is now agitating men's minds. The German and French philosophy, Puseyism, and even Mormonism, are among the indications of the coming change; and the danger is that it may take a wrong direction. In those phases of the world's history, much frequently depends on a single man; yet, it has been truly said, it is the age that forms the man, not the man that forms the age. Had Mahomed been reared within the pale of Christianity, he had probably been a Christian reformer, instead of the founder of an antagonistic religion; had Luther or Voltaire lived in the third or fourth century, they would have attacked the paganism of ancient Rome, instead of the dogmas of modern Rome. If Bacon had been born in earlier times, he would, perhaps, have been a teacher of the Aristotelian schools. Each of these men was the product of his age, and supplied the intellectual wants of that age, according to its requirements. Yet, if they had never existed, the revolutions which they headed would have come to pass. When, in the progress of human thought, the moment for action arrives, the man fit for the work appears on the scene. If Luther had passed his life as a humble monk in a convent, the Reformation would have been achieved, for Huss and many others had prepared the path for the coming man; if Voltaire had never written, the train which fired the French Revolution would have been laid; if Newton had not invented the method of fluxions, or Bacon taught the science of induction, others would have done so—not so well, it may be, but it would have been done; and even America would have been discovered without Columbus, because the time for its discovery had come. The same may be said of Political Economy, the Steam Engine, Photography, and the Electric Telegraph. Nay, even the Atlantic Cable would be laid if Cyrus the Grand had been a myth instead of a live Yankee. These were the right men in the right place, and they performed their allotted tasks; but it was because the harvest was ripe for the hand of the reaper.

Our modern thinkers and reformers appear to us to be repeating an old mistake. They imagine that great truths are wrong because they are wrongly applied. The great truths taught in the Sermon on the Mount, and contained in the Gospel must live for ever; for no truth ever dies. But the early Christians did not read them as those of the middle ages did; Luther read them otherwise than as they were understood by the middle ages; and the present age has commenced a new reading of them. It is not the truth that changes, but men's habits of thought. Truth is always the same—it is the human intellect that is not. It is no more what it was five hundred years ago, than what it will be five hundred years hence. A schoolboy now knows much of astronomical science, of which

Newton was ignorant, but he is not necessarily a Newton on that account. Still it is advancing knowledge that alters our modes of thinking.

The man who thoroughly understands the spirit of his age is its true leader, and his knowledge is the secret of his success. To some, it is an instinct, to some a study. We often wonder why Agis, Brutus, Rienzi, and Huss failed, while others in no way superior to them in ability, succeeded. They were, some behind, and some in advance, of their generation, and their defeat was inevitable. The road that the man of one era finds impassable, and a path of danger and death, he of a future day travels with comparative ease, because it has been smoothed and prepared for him by time and circumstances. Many false teachers of our own time will fail from the same cause; they do not appreciate the spirit of the age, and they are attacking truth, while they ought to guide it into the proper channel. They are false teachers, less from design than from having mistaken their mission. The world is full of half-truths; and it is a safe maxim, not to surrender that which you possess until you can replace it with one which you conscientiously believe, after mature deliberation, to be a better. New ideas will force themselves on most of us, and ought to be cultivated and cherished; but new doctrines should be received with caution, and not accepted but on the clearest evidence of their being based on the rock of truth.

THE DRAMA.

"THE king is dead! long live the king!" Such was the cry, with which, of old, in France, they were wont to announce the death of one Bourbon, and hail the succession of another; and very much of such a nature, in these days of starring engagements—when no sooner does one star cease to illumine the dramatic horizon than another arises—would seem to be the duty of the faithful recorder and commenter upon theatrical events. The star, Miss Cecile Rush, whose performances now call for attention, is no mere rushlight (we mean no pun), but an artiste, whose acting is marked by ease and finish, and is conspicuous by the absence of that straining after effect that too often mars the efforts of really accomplished aspirants for histrionic fame.

In "Fanchon the Cricket," her rendering of the wayward, true-hearted, neglected girl, was very pleasing. Her strange demeanor and eccentric make up, in the first act, were quite in accordance with the seemingly singular speeches and actions the author has invested the character with; while the gradual change that came over the mind of Fanchon, under the influence of love, during the remainder of the piece, was strikingly evidenced, by the improvement in her costume and manner. The way in which Fanchon overcame the prejudices of those by whom she was surrounded, and won to her favour, one by one, the relations of her lover Landry, until she finally gained the consent to her marriage, with his son, of Father Barbeaud, the most obstinate of all her foes,—was as little to be resisted by the minds of the audience, as it was by the characters in the play. Mrs. Charles Hill, as Mother Barbeaud, acted very cleverly; the matrimonial quarrel between her and Father Barbeaud (very well played by Mr. T. A. Beckett) was immense. Miss G. Reynolds deserves a word of praise for her rendering of a difficult part, "Old Fadet," Fanchon's grandmother, and a reputed witch. Mr. Vining Bowers was quaintly comical as Didier, the spoiled twin-brother of Fanchon's