

THE ANTIDOTE

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LITERARY.

In the "Fortnightly" for July there is a review of some recent novels by Mr. Francis Adams, who commences, "In the domain of what is loosely called Literature, each decade has its special samples of a noisy popular success, or of a half success only less noisy. They come and go—these plagues of time, as blissfully unaware of their predecessors as of their followers, large and small, poorly clad and richly clad, of every size and description, crowding to their doom." When we read this it appeared to us that the critic was assuming a far higher place "in the domain of Literature" for novels than ever was claimed by their authors. Let us ask why are novels written, and what should they give to the reader? They are written primarily, and apart from any sentimental gloss, for money, and they are intended to portray certain phases of life, manners, customs, and characters, at the period at which the tale is supposed to take place. If a novel accomplishes both these ends, it may fairly be said to be a success, and that such success is only temporary, in no way detracts from the merits of the author, any more than the dish which the cook serves up and which is eaten with a relish, is forgotten a week hence. Both aims have been gained, and if the taste either of the mind, or of the palate,

change, the author or the cook should not be blamed since it was only for the time that each endeavored to tickle the fancy. Novels do not pretend to be history except in a very partial manner, and when Mr. Adams talks of a decade of success, as though in sarcasm, it seems to us he is simply condemning all novels, for even Fielding and Smollett, Dickens, Bulwer, and Thackeray, have had their day, and we may add served their turn.

The Reviewer is astonished at the success, which greeted two such, female prigs in black coats and breeches, as "Danjel Deronda" and "Robert Elsmere," and yet with regard to the latter immediately gives the explanation by saying it is the religious liberalism of the hour, amended up to date. In other words the author, Mrs. Ward, seized her opportunity and was equal to the occasion! He could scarcely, though unintentionally, have given the novelist higher praise. What though the hour passes, and having enjoyed the succulent joint, you now crave for some sweets, or cheese, the joint was none the less a success, while it lasted! We confess that for our part, the fault we found with Robert Elsmere was that the dish was a trifle heavy, and there was too much of it, but when Mr. Adams states that in Mrs. Ward lay "the gift of clever, partial and spiteful observation, which is the heritage of the simple daughter of Eve," we think the author might justly retort "Tu quoque oh son of Adam."

Another book that Mr. Adams reviews is "The Deemster, by Hall Caine, which he condemns "with faint praise," by saying that it "broke up one of the most persistent attacks of insomnia" he had ever experienced while wandering about to escape England's pessimistical winter. We cannot say the effect was the same with ourselves, for the improbability of the tale caused an irritation which completely banished the drowsy god until we flung the book aside.

We are also unable quite to agree with Mr. Adams in his opinion of "The Little Minister," by Mr. Barrie, for while the "Egyptian woman" is certainly an impossible character, yet there are touching passages in the book,

which not only redeem it from failure, but show that the author is capable of writing a pleasing story if he would not give too much rope to his imagination.

To conclude, in reference to the novels of the present day, they appear to us as a rule, to make the story, too much dependent upon incident and situation, so to speak, each character being

"but a walking shadow—a poor
player
That struts and frets his hour upon
the stage,
And then is heard no more."

Writers of fiction in portraying their various figures, sketch the same with a very light pencil, in place of the finished portraits, given us by the authors of former days, but that style of drawing, being suited to the taste of the "decade" as that most "pessimistical" of critics, Mr. Adams, terms it, the taste, not the novelist, should be blamed, for as it would be manifestly absurd for a theatrical manager, to continue a play of Shakspeare to empty benches when he could fill the house by a burlesque, so a novelist has to cater to the whim of his readers. When the public demand more of real Literature in novels, depend upon it writers will rise up who will supply the demand, meanwhile (so long as they offend not against good taste or morals) authors are quite as sensible, as other merchants in offering goods that are saleable.

Robert Elsmere may be a prig, but at least he is not a murderer with a hero's cloak thrown over him like Eugene Aram and dulness is healthier than sophistry. It is only a very few novels, that can be put in the category of high-class literature, and when we are tired of gazing upwards at the giants of Brobdingnag, we may be amused with the antics of the Lilliputians.

From "Pick-me-up."

AT THE WEDDING BREAKFAST.

Timid Groomsman (vainly endeavoring to make himself audible amid the hum of conversation).—I now wish to propose—to propose—

Elderly Bridesmaid (seizing the opportunity).—Oh! dear Mr. Smalleyes, how sudden! but I knew it would come—my heart has long been yours.—