

AMONG OUR BOOKS.



GENIUS is born in one; it is a divine possession — or, perhaps, rather a possession of the divine in intenser degree than that given to the average man or woman. We cannot acquire genius, but we may acquire talent; for talent is a measure of inclination plus unlimited perseverance and practice in the direction of that inclination.

Something of this kind occurs to us as we handle the works of certain authors.

One of the surprising things is the large number of acceptable writers who are not geniuses, nor even in possession of high measure of talent.

It never occurs to us, for instance, to rank Howells as a genius, nor James, nor—to cross the ocean—Walter Besant; yet these men are types of highly successful and entertaining novelists of to-day. Their books have extensive sale; their writing commands good prices from publisher and press; they may be accounted in the first rank of successful litterateurs.

There are many others who in less degree have also achieved a satisfactory measure of success, in that they have found favour with a large reading public; who, after all, demand little more than that a story should be fairly well told and possess just the right dash of morality. For the mass of the reading public does demand that its standard literature should be moral. It may enjoy the abnormal in morals as a piquancy, but the flavour is fortunately not to its taste as a daily food.

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A reviewer has always some difficulty in giving just the right measure of criticism to the great hosts of novels that are neither of genius nor the first or second rank of talent, and yet are stories fairly well told, entertaining and of good morale. We refer not to the frivolous love and hate tale of some "fireside weekly," which usually may be passed without a word; but the graver story—a trifle trite, perhaps, and rather hackneyed in situation and sentiment; yet, on the whole, placidly entertaining and healthy.

When a reviewer can class such books as "for the Sunday-school," he is relieved of a difficulty. Yet, in many instances—even granting our broadened conception of Sunday-school literature—a writer who began merely as a writer of Sunday-school tales has by perseverance and increased knowledge of his craft, by persistent cultivation of a mediocre gift, attained to something that we recognise as taking rank in the outside literary world.

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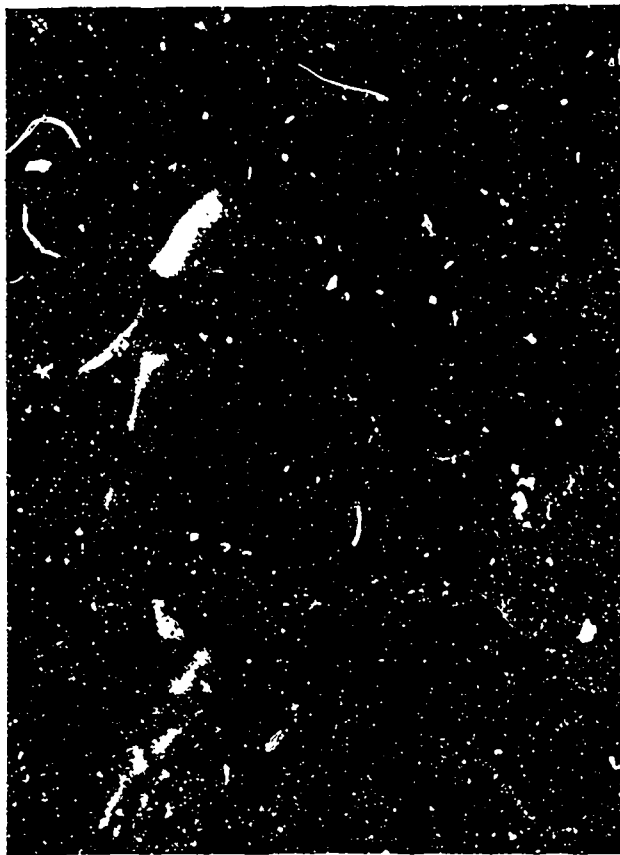
Three books lie upon my desk as I write, by Annie Swan (Mrs. Burnett-Smith). They are chosen from among her latest books, and

show a decided advance upon her earlier writings.

Annie Swan has always been a favourite writer with girls, but in one or two of her latest stories—"The Experiences of a Lady Doctor," for instance,—she achieves a larger audience; since every woman, and not a few men, are interested in Dr. Elizabeth Glen and the bits of life histories that centre in her consulting room. She is a very lovable characterisation, and finds much favour with us.

"Who Shall Serve" deals with the problem of capital and labour; not deeply, but in rather ideal fashion; yet the tale is interesting if conventional.

"A Victory Won," the author's latest, again shows marked advance in character delineation. Eleanor, the discontented young daughter; the bright girl journalist, Frances Sheldon; the heartsome old Scotchwoman, Mrs. Allardyce, and the frail mother, Mrs. Kerr, whose very weakness is her strength, amid the warring natures of her home, are all attractive and well-defined characters.



ANNIE SWAN.

The story is very true to life; not in any exaggerated form, but in the depiction of the small closet skeletons of petty jarrings and commonplace sins which mar the beautiful might-be's of ten thousand homes in the land.

"A Victory Won" tells one or two strong truths, whose lack of recognition has kept the weary old world in discord ever since Paradise gates were closed against an offending pair,—that we cannot gather figs from thistles, that as we sow we shall reap, even in this world, and that the power of one frail life in touch with the divine, is greater than that of an herculean human will.

Annie Swan, whose photograph we are able to give in our page this month, has another book in press entitled "Margaret Grainger, or the Experiences of a School Teacher." It will probably be a companion work to "Elizabeth Glen, M.B.," and, if of equal merit, should prove very popular.

"A Victory Won," Annie Swan. Wm. Briggs, Toronto.

In "Cleg Kelly," that graphic Scotch writer, S. R. Crockett, has again proved his versatility. We knew he could give us stirring tales of venture, as in "The Raiders"; sketches of Scottish character, full of romance, yet filled with the hill strength, as in "The Sickit Minister" and "Bog Myrtle and Peat"; the daintiest of sunny love stories, as "The Lilac Sunbonnet."

Now we find in "Cleg Kelly" a portraiture of the life of a Scotch street arab, told with a fidelity that makes us marvel at the author's understanding of street arab nature.

For "Cleg Kelly" is not ideal; he is a Scotch Huckleberry Finn, with all of the added vigour of the heather-land in his constitution, moral and physical.

We understand at the outset that the sense of honour, curiously perverted, yet instinctive and true, which graces and guards "Tim Kelly's loon," comes to him through his mother. There is not a more touching scene than that introduced, alas, all too early in Cleg's history, where little Cleg plays happily in the brickyard, while his mother watches him at the window, reluctant to spoil his play, waits for the last touch of pain.

Her son caught sight of her at the window. He waved his hand and called aloud:

"Mither, mither, I'm biggin' a bonny hoose for ye to leeve in!"

Isbel smiled.

"My guid boy, my nice boy," she said.

"Let him big his hoose. In an hour I shall cry to him. I dinna need him yet, my ain laddie!"

Yet in an hour she did not cry, and it was the only time she had ever broken word to her son.

But that was because she had journeyed where no crying is.

So little Cleg is left with his father—drunkard and housethief—who is "shut up" for a year or more at a time, and the boy grows up in veritable street arab fashion. The charm of the book is many sided. It is written largely from the street arab's point of view. We comprehend the unique workings of Cleg's untrained yet philosophic mind; and follow him appreciatively into the larger world which the years make for him.

We are made acquainted with Cleg's friends, and carried through many an incident, homely enough in itself, yet picturesque and strong: little Vara Kavannah and her sorrowful charge, the funny record of

Cleever's boy, the humanities of charming Celie Tennant, the heroism of Muckle Alick, and the vagaries of the ma' general. There are black records in the book, that make us wince—the bald, grim records of low, crime-filled lives; yet these but offset the brightness that comes of Cleg's humorous ventures in his steady advance upward.

"Cleg Kelly" will become a type, since he represents not an abnormal creation, but a thoroughly natural, healthy bit of street ignorance in bad environment, reaching up in unconscious heroism for the best in his outlook, and guarded always by a humorous philosophy.

The book is written with all of Mr. Crockett's vigour; while the humorous vagaries of Cleg's sense of justice, especially in his effort to keep debit and credit account with his friends and foes balanced, prevent the dark early background from becoming oppressive.

"Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City," by S. R. Crockett Wm. Briggs, Toronto.

REVIEWER.