

CHOISE LITERATURE.

WORKS OF FICTION.

(Concluded.)

Good novels, in the second place, give recreation. The body, sometimes, through overwork, becomes weak and jaded. When this happens, a sojourn in the country is recommended; and the change of scene, new places, new persons, and gentle exercise soon restore the physical powers to their wonted health. In the same way, the mind is often harassed and weakened by its own anxious thoughts. It cannot still them, and they set upon it, and attack it and worry it almost to madness. Now, under these circumstances, a good novel is to the mind what a country sojourn is to the body. It is true that there are other remedies which need not be mentioned here, but this, too, is a genuine remedy. By the force of its charm it carries us away from our tormenting thoughts, interests us with new scenes, incidents, and characters, calls the faculties of our mind and the affections of our hearts into gentle exercises, and thus restores our health and happiness. We have said that the novelist is an educator. We now say that he is a physician, well qualified to cure certain diseases of the mind, to dispel the vapours, to restore the tone and elasticity of the spirits, and to nerve us once more for the duties of life. Look, for example, at the incalculable amount of happiness that one novelist, Charles Dickens, has given to the human race. We refer not to his wonderful powers of conducting a story, sketching original characters, satirizing social abuses, or wielding the highest gift of all, namely, that of poetic imagination. We only refer to his joyous humour. Surely never had travellers into the realms of fiction such an exhilarating guide? What an overflow of the finest animal spirits, what floods of sunny geniality, and what an inexhaustible sympathy with everything good and true! With what intense delight does he dwell upon the varying scenes in nature—the luxuriant foliage of summer, the frosty roads of winter, a little hamlet dozing in the sun, a ship at sea battling with the winds and waves. With what relish does he dive into the busy haunts of men, and take an interest in all their pleasures and amusements! In what a tender and appreciative way does he point out the many estimable qualities that lurk under the rough and mean appearance of the poor man—his patience, his contentment, his love for his wife and children, and for the innocent pleasures of his home! When will the world ever forget that Christmas dinner at Bob Cratchit's, where all the members took part in preparing it, where "Mrs. Cratchit made the gravy ready beforehand in a little saucepan hissing hot; Master Peter mashed the potatoes with incredible vigour; Miss Belinda sweetened up the apple sauce; Martha dusted the hot plates; Bob took tiny Tim beside him in a tiny corner at the table; the two young Cratchits set chairs for everybody, not forgetting themselves, and, mounting guard upon their posts, crammed spoons into their mouths, lest they should shriek for goose before their turn came to be helped?" Even the most commonplace objects catch a brightness from Dickens as he passes by. A portrait he calls "the coloured shadow of a man." The houses of London he represents as "peppered with smoke." A heavy door in an old rambling building is represented as "firing a long train of thundering reverberations. Copperfield's bed in an inn was "an immense fourposter, which was quite a little landed estate." The pockets of the Artful Dodger were so large that they seemed to undermine his whole suit of clothes. A certain dragon was so tall that "he looked like the afternoon shadow of somebody else." Trotty Veck's mittens had "a private apartment only for the thumb, and a common room or tap for the rest of the fingers." Roger Riderhood had "an old sodden fur cap, formless and mangy, and that looked like a furry animal, dog or cat, puppy or kitten, drowned and decaying." See also how much he can make of an old mat: "Being useless as a mat, it had for many years directed its industry into another channel, and tripped up every one." And what a charm he throws around even his most insignificant characters! He has been accused of caricaturing them and making too much of them. But what, after all, does this matter? This habit just arises from his love for the children of his brain, and his desire to make other people like them. In the outburst of his genial humour he pulls them about, puts them into the most amusing attitude, and makes them appear under the most unexpected similes. Take a few examples. Some are remarkable for their appearance. We have—Dora's aunts, not unlike birds altogether, having a sharp, brisk, sudden way of adjusting themselves like canaries; the apoplectic Major Bagstock, "with a complexion like a Stilton cheese, and eyes like a prawn's," and who not only rose in the morning like a giant refreshed, but conducted himself at breakfast like a giant refreshing; the gawky fisher lad, Ham, whose trousers were so stiff that they could have stood alone, and who did not exactly wear a hat, but was covered in atop, like an old building, with something pitchy; "Captain Cuttle, every inch a sailor, with a handkerchief twisted round his neck like a rope, a large shirt collar like a small sail, and a glazed hat so hard that it made your very head ache to look at it; the old sailor in the lighthouse, "with his face as damaged and scarred with hard weather as the figure-head of an old ship, and who struck up a sturdy song that was like a gale;" a genuine tar by the name of Bogg, "a weazen, old, crab-faced man, in a suit of battered oilskin, who had got tough and stringy from long pickling in salt water, and who smelled like a weedy sea-beach when the tide is out;" Bill Sykes, whose bawky legs always appeared "in an unfinished and incomplete state, without a set of fetters to garish them; a prize-fighter, named the Game Chicken, whose face bore the marks of having been frequently broken and but indifferently mended;" and shabby-genteel Tony Jobling, the rim of whose hat "had a glistering appearance as if it had been a favourite promenade for snails." Other characters are distinguishable by some peculiarity in their disposition. There is Pecksniff, the very ideal of a hypocrite, "like a direction post always pointing out the road

to virtue and never going there himself." There is Miggs, a gaunt servant-of-all-work, who imagines that she is soaring to the very height of Christian charity when she exclaims, "I hope I hates and despises both myself and all my fellow-creeturs." Then there is Joe Willet, the stolid landlord of the Maypole, who can never think unless he is basking before a roaring fire, whose head, in fact, requires to be cooked before it will let out any ideas. There is also the immortal Micawber, threadbare, poverty-stricken, helplessly in debt; but always great and glorious, when he describes his misery in grandiloquent words and long-resounding sentences.

When we think of the vast amount of innocent enjoyment which we ourselves have derived from Dickens' works; and when we multiply this amount by the millions of people who read these works in all parts of the world, we are lost in astonishment at the incalculable addition to the sum of human happiness which one man has been destined to make. His humour has, indeed, been one of the best tonics ever invented, and he himself one of the great benefactors of the human race.

Novels, in the third place, teach history. The novelist is really a historian of the motive and actions of men and of the manners of his own age. But he also sometimes goes back to by-gone ages, into the region of history proper; and this, in our opinion, he does legitimately. Partly from lack of materials, and partly from a deficiency of imaginative power, the historian proper, as a rule, has not been successful in making this region interesting to the general public. It is a misty, colourless, lifeless land. The student is very soon involved in endless tangles of political intrigues and military manoeuvres. The great characters flit before him like ghosts, formless and silent; and there are no every-day people like himself in whom he can take an interest. Now, the historical novelist undertakes to remedy this defect. He sheds the light of his fancy on this dim land. He chooses the most striking of the political intrigues and manoeuvres, and mingles them with tales of private life and adventure. He gives form and soul and colour to the great men; and to make them more life-like he associates with them a number of ordinary mortals, the creations of his own imagination. In fact, he imparts to the whole region, which was only a shadow before, an appearance of reality. Look, for instance, at what Sir Walter Scott has done for Scottish history. Before his time, with the exception of the parts relating to Wallace and Bruce, and Queen Mary, it may be said to have been unknown. It was a confused conglomeration of antiquarian relics in the midst of which nobody, save Dr. Dryasdust, could live. Passing among these remains, the genius of Scott stirred the dry bones and made them live. In his novels we see old Scotland revived. He has built up the old castles. He has filled the old suits of armour with living beings of real bone and muscle. These ghosts of dead warriors that hover over the well-fought fields he has caused to take form and to fight, and to taste again the wild delights of battle. He has made the more notable Scots of old—the Stuart kings, Mary, Regent, Murray, Montrose, Claverhouse, Argyle—walk out of their portrait frames, and move, and talk, and act; and he has surrounded them with imaginary characters so varied, so palpable, so racy of the soil, that they throw an atmosphere of reality over the whole. Scott's sketches of these historical characters may be considered by extremely fastidious critics as incorrect, but they have at least this merit, that they are life-like.

Such are the ways in which novels may be used. But throughout the world there is a countless number who abuse them. They are of both sexes, and of all ages; and though they may be men and women in appearance, in mind they are mere children. None of their mental faculties has been developed save their curiosity. "A story, a story," is all they require to amuse their childish intellect and to kill time. Sometimes they alight upon a good novel; but their minds are so feeble that they cannot digest it. The characters pass through their intellect without leaving any impression. "They come like shadows, and so depart." But generally the novels which they read are of the namby-pamby order, or of that kind called sensational, whose characteristics are murder, mystery, and wicked intrigue. If they are namby-pamby, reading them is like sipping jelly-water. If they are sensational, they are like Mrs. Squeers' posset of brimstone and treacle. In both cases they destroy the mental appetite and make it loathe all solid food.

Now what is the cure for this lamentable condition? How is novel reading to be reduced to a minimum? We cannot have a censor of works of fiction to prohibit the publication of all those that are objectionable. We might prescribe certain tests by which worthless books might be detected; but the majority of readers would not take the trouble to apply the tests, and even if they did, by that time the objectionable works (if they were objectionable) would have been read and the evil would have been done. The only cure is to do what physicians do in so many cases of bodily weakness, namely, to raise the general tone of the system. We would propose, therefore, when the patients are young, to stimulate and elevate the tone of the mental system. This we would do in three ways:

1. We would cultivate the imagination of young people when they are at school. We would say to the teacher: The remedy of this great evil of indiscriminate novel reading is in your hands. Get rid of the notion that the human mind is a mere bag to be filled with knowledge. Get rid of the notion that a boy is an ingenious automaton, that may be made to go through certain motions to please Her Majesty's Inspector at the end of the year. Recollect that he has an imagination that is hungering to be fed with stories about his fellow-beings. Develop and nourish this faculty with narratives from history, biography and general literature. Do not be content with giving (as is generally done) the mere husks of the subject names and dates. Give him the very kernel, the very spirit. Throw your whole being into the subject, place yourself in fancy among the circumstances you are describing; be, for the time, the character you are representing, and make the whole lesson as life-like as possible. If you can do this your success is certain. Surely there is enough of thrilling incidents in history, surely there is enough of striking characters in biography, surely

there is enough of delightful passages in English literature, to charm the very dullest intellect.

2. But if this plan does not succeed, and if young people will still read novels indiscriminately, there is still another remedy in reserve. We should meet novel-readers on their own ground. We should say, "Well, if you will insist upon reading novels, we will read them along with you." We should invite them to hear a course of lectures on the chief novellists of the present century. The lecturer, besides having a thorough grasp of the subject, should not be a dry man, but should be able to make everything he touches clear and interesting. Taking up each of the principal novels in turn, he should tell the plan graphically and vividly, describe the principal characters dramatically, bring out the individuality of each, read illustrative extracts, and point out the merits and defects of each work. If this were done properly, young people could scarcely fail to appreciate the standard works of fiction, and appreciating them would not fall back upon those that are worthless.

"Could they on this fair mountain leave to feed,
And batten on this moor?"

Give an ass the run of a clover field, and he will wish no longer to feed on thistles.

3. There is still another remedy. Young people should never be allowed to idle away their time. Idleness is the soil from which almost every wickedness grows. When we are idle, both our bodies and our minds soon become morbid. Being morbid we look at everything and everybody with a jaundiced eye; and the people of every-day life seem insipid, tiresome, and even hateful. We take refuge in novels, and devote our interest and our affections to the shadowy beings of an ideal world. The disease grows with what it feeds on, and the result is unhealthy sentiment and passion, which not unfrequently end in scandalous deeds. To all young people, therefore, we would say: Have something to do. Whether you are rich or poor, have some useful employment. And let it be some fixed task which you cannot shirk at a moment's notice. Carlyle compares the work of this world to an immense hand-barrow with innumerable handles, of which there is one for every human being. But there are some people, he says, so lazy, that they not only let go their handle, but they jump upon the barrow and increase the weight. Don't let go your handle. There is abundance of work in this busy world for every one who has a human heart.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CETYWAYO.

At length it was announced that the king was prepared to receive us. We followed our guide into the open air and to the front door of the house, which opened directly into one of the principal rooms. The floor and walls were rough and bare; on the left was a long row of brown wooden chairs, and on the right, facing them, sat Cetywayo, along side a pile of wooden boxes reaching nearly to the ceiling, probably containing the personal effects which he was to transport to his native country. He shook hands with becoming gravity, and as he turned towards the rest of the party I took the opportunity to study his face. It was a purer and blacker negro face than I had anticipated, but entirely without the repulsive features of the Caffre and other tribes which supply labourers to the Cape Colony. Easy good-nature was the quality which seemed most strongly expressed, and there was a general air of frankness about the man which explained how he had made so favourable an impression on his captors.

He was attired in a threadbare suit of blue flannel, well fitted to exhibit a physical development which any man might envy. His shirt collar seemed to have been several days absent from the laundry, and one end had broken loose from its button. Perhaps this as much as anything emphasized the contrast between the impression made by the man and what I knew of his history, and made it hard to conceive that one was in the presence of a modern Attila, who was once the terror of both races through a large part of South Africa. Could this be the king who, when the superiority of civilized weapons was first made clear to him, gave his chief officer till the grass should grow knee-high to arm his troops with muskets, on pain of death or banishment?—this the man who, when a missionary preached hell fire to him, laughed to scorn the idea of a fire which his soldiers could not quench, and made good his words by setting fire to a field of dry-grass, and then sending a regiment into it, who stamped it out with their naked feet?

As we had a little favour to ask, the Astronomer Royal, with diplomatic acuteness opened the conversation upon an agreeable subject. The party had just paid a visit to the admiral of the South African station, and learned that he expected H.M.S. *Bristol*, which was on her way down the west coast, to arrive at Cape Town in a few days, and supposed that she would be designated to convey Cetywayo to Natal without further delay. When this pleasing anticipation was conveyed through the interpreter, the royal reserve vanished in a moment. The king sprang from his seat, danced toward the door, pulled the interpreter after him, and pointed toward the ocean, visible in the distance, with ejaculations of eager anticipation. The interpreter pointed in another direction, and an animated colloquy ensued, ending by the king pulling and laughing at the interpreter in a way which plainly said, "Ah, you rascal, you have been trying to play me a prank!" The interpreter explained that the exciting subject was the direction from which the ship was to come, and that he had been caught pointing in a wrong direction.

This little ebullition still further disarranged the royal shirt collar, the loose end of which now protruded so far as to make the air of dignity with which its owner resumed his seat simply ludicrous. The interpreter, next suggested the comet as a possible subject of interest.

"Would the comet excite fear among your people?" inquired the astronomer.

"No," was the reply. "My people look upon an appearance of that kind above as a sign of good fortune."

"One of the best signs of a healthy mental state you could have given," said I.

The use of the word "above" seemed suggestive of a