

Choice Literature.

AFTER RAIN.

Clouds rifted, seaward drifted like white sails,
A silver rain upon the tangled grasses,
A sweet wind on the mountain where it passes
We'll follow sunward by the lichened rails.

Within the grey, thin shadow of the beeches,
By white pools sleeping in the yellow sun,
On fountain slopes where sparkling shallows run
Beyond the meadows into piney reaches—

Your hand, dear, so—I'll guide you where the flowers
Are new-blown, blue, and golden, where the drumming
Of some lone partridge sounds and brown bees' humming—
Into the silentnesses of dim bowers.

Helen M. Merrill in The Week.

SIR WALTER SCOTT.

The demand for novels and the production of them during the last century have been enormous, but are now greater than ever. Probably there are few more lucrative trades, especially since the passing of the International Copyright Law, than that of a popular-novel writer. The rush into it, accordingly, is great, and, the old love-tale having been pretty well used up, ingenuity is tasked to find new subjects and fresh stimulants. We have sensation novels, detective novels, idyllic novels, moral novels, libidinous novels, theological novels, political novels, social novels, local novels such as those of Miss Murfree, and antiquarian novels such as those of Ebers. Yet of all this multitude that no man can number, Scott remains the king. No imagination has yet appeared so vivid and creative as that which dwelt in the high-peaked head and beamed in the kindly Scottish face, with its shaggy eyebrows and blue eyes. Some of the later novelists have had a good deal more philosophy, and have analyzed character more profoundly, but they have not written such tales.

Scott's reputation perhaps feels the ravages of time most in that part of his works which formed the original essay of his genius and first made him the delight of his contemporaries. He probably knew more of the middle ages, as well as felt a more passionate interest in them, than any other man of his time. But a great deal more is known about them now than we knew, and the weaknesses of his representation are apparent. The stucco of his Gothic edifice has crumbled. Even his descriptions of castles and of sieges show that he antedated Viollet-le-Duc. The Knights on guard at Branksome, who "drank the red wine with helmet barred," would scarcely pass muster with the antiquaries of the present day. Moreover, chivalry has been vulgarized by melodrama and the circus, both of which are unpleasantly recalled to our minds as we read his romances of chivalry. Boys may still delight in 'Ivanhoe' and 'The Talisman'; the mature taste can delight in them no more. In the metrical romances we are carried along by the unflagging vigour of the verse, the spirit of the narrative, and the frequent occurrence of passages of high poetical beauty, such as the well-known lines on the Last Minstrel, the description of the camp at Edinburgh, the scene in the Abbey at Holy Isle, the introduction of Margaret in the "Lay," the tolling of the convent bell heard far off by the stag, in "Marmion," the laying of the shepherd's body in Marmion's tomb. Then there are the charming songs. Above all there is the genuine spirit of the soldier in all the battle-pieces and military pictures. If Scott had not been lame, he would very likely have been a general of cavalry. They are right who say that the most Homeric things in English poetry are his battle-pieces. Moreover, verse itself helps the imagination and disarms the critical faculty. But when it comes to reproducing in prose the life, ideas, and language of people separated from the writer by a gulf of seven change-

ful centuries, the result can hardly be success. What is produced is sentiment and thought really modern under an exaggerative travesty of ancient phraseology and costume.

The 'Talisman' is to a painful extent melodramatic and hippodromic. Nothing carries an adult reader at the present day through these tales, but the liveliness of the action, and the genuine sympathy of the writer, with the age which he is trying to call out of its grave.

The infirmity extends to the other historical novels, 'Quentin Durward,' 'The Fair Maid of Perth,' 'The Abbot,' 'The Monastery,' 'Kenilworth,' 'The Fortunes of Nigel,' 'Peveril of the Peak,' and 'Woodstock,' in a degree lessening as the subject approaches the writer's time. These tales show, it is true, careful study of history and keen historic insight. Their principal characters are painted in the main with historic truth and justice, as well as with artistic force. Much knowledge of history may be gathered from them in a pleasant way, notwithstanding the audacious anachronisms of 'Kenilworth' and the still more audacious fabrications of 'Woodstock.' Still, they are more or less desperate efforts to reproduce the unreplicable. In all, recourse is inevitably had to the exaggeration of antique language, fashions, and costume. All savor of the stage or the fancy ball. The euphuism of Sir Pierce Shafton in 'The Monastery' is a palpable travesty; and not less so are the tortuous and unctuous harangues put into the mouth of Cromwell in 'Woodstock.' To a student of history the historical novel altogether is somewhat unpalatable; he always feels that it is a falsification, and the mixture of fact with fiction affects him like a mixture of gaslight with daylight.

It is in the novels of which the subjects belong to Scott's own time, and in which his creative genius has full play over its legitimate field, that unimpaired delight is, and will always be found. 'Waverley,' 'The Antiquary,' 'Guy Mannering,' 'St. Ronan's Well,' 'The Heart of Midlothian,' 'Rob Roy,' 'Old Mortality,' 'The Bride of Lammermoor,' can die only with human nature or the English tongue. We include 'Waverley,' 'Old Mortality,' and 'Rob Roy' because the Covenanter and the Jacobite were so near to Scott in the Scotland of his day, as to be fairly within the grasp of his imagination. Nor is there any fault to be found with the slight background of pretty recent history in 'The Bride of Lammermoor.' The weakness which has been often pointed out, is the general insipidity of the heroes and heroines. The Master of Ravenswood is about the only one of the heroes for whom we much care; and even in his case the interest is rather that of circumstances than of character. Effie Deans touches our hearts, and Diana Vernon is charming in her way. But for the most part, the heroes and heroines are little more than the figures which set the plot in motion, and about which the other figures revolve. This may be in some measure a legacy from the romance of chivalry, in which the hero could only be a knight sans peur et sans reproche, and the lady could only be a queen of beauty—both of them colourless, and interesting only on account of the feat of arms which the knight performed for the lady's sake. But it is not easy to throw much character into a number of pairs of figures alike destined to love, to crosses in love, and to an early marriage. Scott himself was quite conscious of the weakness. "I am a bad hand," he said, "at depicting a hero properly so-called, and have an unfortunate propensity for the dubious characters of Borderers, Buccaneers, Highland Robbers, and all others of a Robin Hood description." Elsewhere he says: "My rogue always, in spite of me, turns out my hero." It is of little consequence, however, what the nominal hero or heroine is, so long as Marmion, Dugald Dalgetty, Caleb Balderstone, Dirk Hatteraick, Dominie Sampson, Meg Dods, and the rest of the characters, nominally minor, delight us as they do.

The position which 'Waverley' holds at the head of the list is rather traditional than justified by intrinsic merit. This

tale was the first of the series, and it took the world by storm. But it opened what was then a new world of beauty and a new field of romance, the Scotch Highlands and the life of the Highland clans. Before Scott's time, people had spoken of the Highlands with a shudder, as a region of bleak hills, bogs, and mists, amid which wandered breechless savages and thieves. Ossian had done little to expel the idea; in fact, Gibbon cites him in confirmation of it, remarking that on every hypothesis he was a Scotchman. Walter Scott lifted the curtain, and the world was entranced at the sight, not suspecting that, as far as Highland character and life was concerned, the show owed a good deal to the showman. Now, the Highlands swarm with tourists, and at the door of each British tobaccoist stands the figure of a Highlander in full costume, taken to be native, though in its present elegant form it is really the device of a Hanoverian tailor. The first chapters of 'Waverley,' describing the hero's family and education, are heavy. The structure of the plot is by no means on a level with Scott's best. Col. Talbot is too palpable a deus ex machina; the pedantic learning of the Baron of Bradwardine, though amusing at first, is overdone, and the characters of Fergus MacIvor and his sister are tinged with melodrama. As to the hero, Scott himself said of him that he was a "sneaking piece of imbecility," and that "if he had married Flora, she would have set him up upon the chimney-piece as (the dwarf) Count Borowlski's wife used to do with him." He is, in fact, a nonentity.

Scott's style is loose and too often prolix, though there is always a genial glow which makes you kind to the faults. He wrote too much, and too fast to write with care and finish. The idea, however, that he extemporized his matter as well as his language, is absurd and baseless. He tells us that he gave days to thought and invention. Of 'Marmion,' a great part he says, was composed on horseback. The looseness and prolixity, of course, increased when he was producing volumes as rapidly as he could to work off his financial embarrassments. A third of the page might sometimes be struck out with advantage to the rest.

Historically, Scott belongs to the era of the Revolution, and his works form a part of the vast literature to which that great stirring of thought and feeling gave birth. But he belongs to the back-stream, not to the cataract. The cataracts of history have their back-streams; that of the Reformation was neo-Catholicism; that of the Revolution was the conservative reaction which showed itself in literature as well as in politics, and makes itself felt in the mature works of Wordsworth and Southey. The Puseyites prized Scott as one who had turned the eyes of men to the past. Ecclesiastical reactionists, however, could hardly claim Scott as a precursor. There was nothing ecclesiastical about him, still less was there anything ascetic. There was even something decidedly anti-ascetic, as the guard-room song in 'The Lady of the Lake' shows. He thought a boon companion "worth the whole Bernardine brood." His passion was for the military and social, not the religious, Middle Ages. With him the priest is little more than chaplain to the knight, pattering a hasty mass while the knight's charger is waiting. His abbots and friars are jovial rather than saintly, and much addicted to the flagon. Even for the church architecture he seems to have had no very strong feeling. There is a famous passage on the ruins of Melrose, in his "Lay," but his language about the Cathedral of Kirkwall would have scandalized Pugin or Newman. "The church," he says, "is as well fitted up as could be expected. Much of the old carved oak remains, but with a motley mixture of modern deal pews. All, however, is neat and clean, and does great honour to the Kirk Session, who maintain its decency." An old church was to him a place where warriors were buried. He cared little for Dante; much for Ariosto. Of Roman Catholicism he spoke as of an effeminate and contemptible superstition. This is the more remarkable as he belonged to

the Episcopal Church of Scotland, which cherished high Anglican doctrine and ritual in opposition to its Presbyterian foe.

In politics Scott was a strong Tory, had a hand in the literature of his party, and refrained during the greater part of his life from actually mingling in the fray only because his party was securely dominant. When radicalism raised its head, and Tory principles were in peril, he came prominently forward, and among the latest incidents of his life, was his maltreatment by a mob for opposing the Reform Bill. His reverence for monarchy was a religion. He was overwhelmed by his feelings at the coronation of George IV., about as farcical a piece of pageantry as was ever enacted, and he describes the whole performance, especially the embrace of those two particular scamps, George IV. and the Duke of York, as unspeakably solemn and impressive; though an antiquary and a horseman, he could not help observing that the champion was rather too much "assisted," did not display his horsemanship as he might, and, instead of the triangular shield of a knight, carried a round target which he could not possibly have used on horseback. When George IV. visited Scotland, Scott was the rapturous master of ceremonies, and dressed up his obese sovereign in a Highland costume, which he strangely chose to regard as national, though by most of the spectators, as Macaulay says, it would be regarded as the dress of a thief. He begged as a precious relic, the glass out of which his health had been drunk by Sacred Majesty in the national whiskey, and put it into his coat pocket, which he carefully held before him. However, soon afterwards, he met Crabbe, and in his delight, forgetting what he had in his coat-tail, sat down upon the glass, with consequences which would have been worse had he not, most improperly, worn trowsers under his kilt. How strong must the artist have been in the man who, when he took up his pen as a novelist, could completely lay aside political sentiments so fervid, and treat with impartial sympathy Cavalier and Roundhead, Jacobite and Whig High Churchman, Puritan and Dissenter! There is not in Scott's novels a trace of anything polemical, or even didactic. Those who like their theology, their politics, and their fiction respectively neat, will prefer to drink of this cup.

The novel-readers of to-day have become so much used to the strange Circean stimulants to which, from the exhaustion of natural and wholesome subjects, novelists are fain to resort, that it is doubtful whether they would be drawn back to Scott by an assurance of his eminent healthiness. Eminently healthy, however, he is. On everything that he writes is impressed the character of a true and noble-hearted gentleman, clean, though not fastidious in spirit, as well as so sound in mind that we almost wonder that he should have taken to writing works of imagination, in the authors of which there is generally discernible something of mental or moral disturbance, something which has led them to take refuge from the real in the ideal. In his coronation raptures, and the homage which he pays to George IV., laughable as they are, there is not a bit of the lackey. He is simply worshipping the embodiments of principles and institutions which he loved; and we are sure that he would have been incapable of saying an ignoble word, or doing a base thing to win the personal favour of a whole dynasty of kings. If he speaks with hyperbolic respect of a Duke of Buccleuch, it is not because he cringes to rank, but because the Duke is the chieftain of his clan. So the eagerness to increase his estate, for which Carlyle is inclined to censure him, and which brought an avalanche of misfortune on him in his latter days, is no sordid love of money; it is the desire of realizing his social ideal in a baronial Abbotsford. He was a practical poet and romancer. In adversity his fortitude, his patience, his magnanimity are most noble and touching. Nothing, indeed, in biography is more touching than the diary of his later and darker years. His temper is never soured; it is hardly even ruffled by harsh treatment. When his creditors generally are forebear-