

### THE NIGHT-BLOOMING CEREUS.

ALL day upon the sunny southern wall  
The cactus-buds rest in a slumber deep ;  
They stir and swell, but wake not from their sleep,  
Though the warm sun-rays kiss them as they fall.

All day the sunbeams woo, the breezes call,  
The green buds dream, the shadows slowly creep :  
All day the calyx-sheaths their secret keep,  
Enfolden shyly from the gaze of all.

The warm sun sinks—the full moon riseth bright  
From the soft bosom of the hazy sea :—  
The tender buds disclose their mystery  
With sweet reluctance to her wooing sight.  
A thousand waxen cups, gold-stamened, free  
Their spicy fragrance to the dewy night,

BESSIE GRAY.

### "TOM JONES," "PENDENNIS," AND "DANIEL DERONDA."

ANTHONY TROLLOPE, in his "Autobiography," says he doubts if any young person can read with pleasure George Eliot's later novels. And he adds : "I know they are very difficult reading to many who are not young."

As far as most young people are concerned, he might have made the same assertion of all the great works of genius that have ever been written ; of the works of the great Greek dramatists ; of Shakespeare's finest plays ; of the masterpieces of Goethe and Schiller. All that the average young person, or indeed the average reader of any age, desires in a book is an exciting society story, or a sensational tale of startling adventures. Any thing in fiction that rises into a higher sphere is rejected as dull and tedious.

George Eliot's novels are not merely entertaining stories, they are life-dramas, dealing with the souls of men. They have for their themes the most difficult problems of human existence ; some "choice of the ways," some deed of noble self-sacrifice, some tragedy of pity or terror, in which the old truth that the wages of sin is death gains new force by the power with which it is presented. Art, in her hand, is a great teacher directed by a wise insight that recognised all the good that was in the world, notwithstanding the evil that so often marred it, and a large charity that sympathised with all the struggles and limitations of human nature.

Thackeray also assumed to be a moral teacher, or censor, as he liked to call himself ; but while George Eliot's method is mainly a loving sympathy that leaves her readers with hope and trust in the future of humanity, Thackeray's is a half bitter, half mocking cynicism that places the reader, the writer, and the creatures he has brought into existence on the lowest plane of virtue and intellect. To compare the pictures of men and women given by George Eliot, and the circumstances that surround them, with his, is like comparing "the morning on the horizon with the morning mixed with street gas." The world he shows us is almost exclusively the conventional and artificial world of "society," with its parasites, satellites, and hangers-on of every description, depicted in its worst and most degrading aspects. He never admits even a glimpse of the higher aims and nobler ambitions which are probably as often to be found among men of rank and title as are the odious vices of Lord Steyne and Sir Pitt Crawley. Every character is painted in the darkest colours. All the men are mean, selfish, and profligate ; all the women hard and worldly, or foolish and hypocritical. Now and then, apparently as a concession to weak-minded readers, he makes a sort of apology for the blackness of his pictures, and bows down reverentially before the images of virtue and piety which scarcely ever appear as real existences in his works. He depicts his vicious characters with terrible strength, certainty, and vividness ; but when he attempts to give us the portrait of a good man, his hand becomes weak, his strokes uncertain, his drawing painfully out of proportion. He appears to have thought that a man of a pure life could hardly be honest or manly, except in those abnormal cases where physical defect or mental feebleness preserves virtues otherwise incompatible with human nature. William Dobbin, we are told, had just thoughts and good brains, his life was honest and pure, his heart warm and humble. But—he was awkward and ungainly, had enormous hands and feet, and large ears ; he lisped ; in fact he was an uncouth Orson. He made himself the obedient slave of a woman whom he knew to be unworthy of his devotion ; he was, in truth, a spooney, and, with all his goodness, a little ridiculous. Then we have Colonel Newcome, the model gentleman, the pious and chivalrous *preux chevalier* ; his weakness in some cases almost amounts to imbecility ; and when he falls under the dominion of foolish little Rosy and her most detestable mother, it is difficult to prevent some contempt mingling with our pity,

instead of that admiring sympathy a good man struggling with adversity should command. There is this purposely perverse drawing in all Thackeray's pictures of excellence. He continually throws his best characters into some mean or ridiculous attitude. Even Warrington, whom he seems to have loved the best of all his creations, has been ruined by degrading antecedents. In Esmonde he did his utmost to portray a man at once good, brave and lofty-minded ; but it went against his natural bent, and the effort was visible. "After all," he said, "Esmonde was a prig."

And this leads to an inference which may be fairly drawn from all his writings, that those vices, called by an amiable euphemism "sowing wild oats," are inseparable from the career of every young man of spirit and manliness who mixes with the world. Fielding, whose own dissipated and reckless habits were treated by Thackeray in his "Humourists" much too leniently, was naturally of the same opinion. The hero of his world-famed novel, "Tom Jones," sows his wild oats through a course of low vice and degrading intrigue till he settles down to respectability and domestic felicity with the lovely Sophia. Thackeray's young men do their sowing in a less open and vigorous fashion, owing, he tells us, to the tone and temper of the age, which will not bear undraped truth. "Since the author of 'Tom Jones' was buried," he says, "no writer of fiction among us has been permitted to depict to his utmost power a *man*." Therefore, in deference to the hypocritical refinement of the time our modern Fielding gave us, instead of "Tom Jones," Arthur Pendennis. Every reader knows how poor a creature this Pendennis is, as all Thackeray's young men are. Lord Kew, one of the manliest and most straightforward among them, has led a life so unfit to bear the light that when it has been made known to the girl to whom he is engaged, he gives her up at once, too honest to attempt any defence, too proud to endure the shame of having to blush before his wife. And we are taught in these brilliant books, through every form of irony, satire, and cynicism, that this is what men really are, and that nothing better can be expected from them. The only exception is Dobbin, whose absurd name, ungainly figure, and awkward manners mark him out from the first as an almost ridiculous oddity. As for greatness of mind, high intellect, lofty aspirations, they have no existence in Thackeray's works, except as the figments of romance, or the stage properties of cheats and swindlers, and as such affording infinite scope for wit and sarcasm.

In "Daniel Deronda" George Eliot offers her protest against this low code of ethics, this degrading estimate of the possibilities of human nature. She has given us in Deronda a picture of pure and stainless young manhood. He is gifted with the highest mental powers and with distinguished beauty of person. Possessed of abundant means and opportunities for leading a life of selfish pleasure, and placed in peculiar and trying circumstances, he rises through all hindrances to the highest level of thought and deed, and finally devotes his life to a noble purpose. It might have been supposed beforehand that such a character, depicted by a great dramatic artist, whose clear and certain knowledge of human nature and power of truthfully delineating its various manifestations, had been universally acknowledged, would have been received with respect, if not with appreciation. But, on the contrary, it was treated with unmitigated contempt. Mr. Swinburne's scornful appellations of "wax-work figure," and "doll, whose natural place was above a rag-shop door," capped all other ingenious epithets of detraction, and have been echoed ever since with cuckoo-like iteration.

Perhaps something of this angry antagonism was due to Deronda's Jewish birth and sympathies. In Mr. Swinburne's case it certainly must have been so, as the allusion to a "rag-shop," and in the same sentence the comparison of the fine poem of "The Spanish Gypsy" to "the melodies of a Jew's harp," indicate. Mr. Freeman, the eminent historian, also shows the usual prejudice against the Jewish race by his verdict that "George Eliot was the greatest of all writers of fiction till she took to theories and Jews." But the popular distaste for a height of moral excellence to which novel-readers are not accustomed, except in the case of some devoted minister of religion, is quite sufficient to account for any quantity of carping criticism. And, if Thackeray's young men—selfish, untrustworthy, and weak as water—must be accepted as the best we can expect from human nature, we need not be surprised that Deronda, strong in will, pure in life, and, above all things, faithful to his highest conception of right, should be regarded as "a shadowy and bloodless abstraction." At the same time, it is painfully discouraging to those who have hope in the future of humanity to find that men, and, sadder still, women, who speak the tongue that Milton spake, and ought to be familiar with the history of his beautiful and spotless youth, his high aspirations, and lofty patriotism, object to a similar exalted type of virtue in a modern life-drama as untrue to nature, and uninteresting if it were true.