

## CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE.

## "THE FOUNDATIONS OF BELIEF."

Mr. Gladstone's great name will be associated with classical studies and religious literature as well as with statesmanship; Lord Salisbury's noble address at Oxford is sufficient evidence that he himself is one of that bright band who, from age to age, by strenuous endeavour "pushes forward the boundary of human knowledge, and wins a small strip from the desert of the unknown;" and now the Hon. Arthur Balfour is author of a book on *The Foundations of Belief*, which few men could have written. It invigorates the reader by the power and grasp with which it is instinct and contains passages on which the memory dwells with delight. It will go hard with Mr. Balfour if he does not stand some day as near the British Throne as Mr. Gladstone and Lord Salisbury have stood. Happy and glorious the country whose servants live above low and narrow aims and in the presence of the great realities of life.

"Naturalism" is Mr. Balfour's name for the belief that we may know phenomena, and the laws by which they are connected and nothing more. Apply this belief rigidly to our ideas of what is good, beautiful, rational, and mark the consequence. Nothing ethical is left to us—conscience and duty are no better than the meanest, most repellent contrivance of nature to assist the propagation of life.

A brilliant piece of reasoning, passing from music to fashion and art, shows that if Naturalism be true, we must regard a great composer as ranking only with a good cook; though, indeed, one who ever had a vision of true beauty "knows that somewhere and for some Being there shines an unchanging splendour of beauty, of

which in Nature and in Art we see, each of us from our own standpoint only passing gleams and stray reflections." And Reason? Reason is only one of the many experiments tried by Nature to secure the survival of man. Instinct is superior in every respect save this—it is not adaptable. It is true that Mr. Herbert Spencer looks forward to a perfect development which will make conscience superfluous. But the same reasoning which proves conscience superfluous makes mind superfluous too, and so "when we are all perfectly good we shall also be all perfectly idiotic." So vanish the artist, the poet, the hero, and the saint, and with them "all that gives dignity to life, all that gives value to effort." "We have learned too much." The human race is educated above its position in life.

Are we then compelled to accept these intolerable consequences (which are inevitable if Naturalism be true) on scientific grounds? Why do we accept the "facts" of Science without demur? And on what do they rest? Take an ordinary case of seeing. We see a green tree. Leaving out the tremendous difficulty of how matter acts on mind so as produce the mental effect of seeing a green tree, we have to presuppose the production of light, the undulations of the ether, the reflection of the green undulations (the others being absorbed), the image formed on the retina by a few of these reflected undulations, the action of the optic nerve, and that molecular change in the brain which in some way produces the complex mental effect of seeing a green tree.

Now to prove this and other scientific "facts" we have only one witness, viz: the perception of our