

MR. HOWELLS ON SOME MODERN NOVELISTS.

MR. W. D. HOWELLS, who is rusticated at Lake George, has been discovered by a *Tribune* reporter and duly interviewed. Before we strike into the heart of the interview, we are told that Mr. Howells occupies that long, low rambling cottage on the sunset side of the lake which was built by, and was for many years the home, of Judge Edmunds, whose fame as a spiritualist was quite as great as his fame as a jurist. When discovered, the novelist "with his family about him" was seated upon the front piazza of his cottage, in a soft felt hat, a white flannel shirt, and a large easy pair of corduroy trousers. He looked the picture of good health. Evidently he had not shunned the sunlight, for his face was darkly tanned. After the customary salutation the process of interviewing began:

"Are you contemplating any new literary work, Mr. Howells?"

"Yes. I have just written the first pages of a new novel not yet announced. I began it, in fact, only the day before yesterday. It will be a purely American story, its chief events centred in a New England country town, though it will relate to both city and country life. I have not thought of a name for it yet, nor, though I have its plot pretty well sketched out in my mind, should I feel at liberty to detail it to you just now. The nature of my arrangements with the Harpers, who have contracted with me for all I write, is such that entire good faith requires me to leave with them the time and form of any extended announcements. We shall not leave Lake George before October, and by that time I hope to have the book in fairly good shape."

"How do you work here?"

"There is my little office," replied the novelist, pointing to a little one-storied wing of the house. "Will you look at it?"

It is a pretty room, with a hard-wood floor and plenty of shelving, plentifully stored with books. A picture of Lincoln, after that lately reproduced in *The Century*, and pictures of Tolstoi, Bjornson, Hawthorne, and others were on the walls. A large flat desk and several easy chairs completed the room's furniture.

"I write here for about four hours every morning after breakfast," continued Mr. Howells. "Yes, I become vastly interested in my work. It quite possesses me. Of course there are times when I feel myself unable to think and when it really palls on me, but that is every man's experience in every kind of effort. . . . The real sentiment of to-day requires that the novelist shall portray a section of real life, that has in it a useful and animating purpose. All the good work of our time is being done on this theory."

"Then you do not regard the work of the present English school of romancists as represented, we will say, by Haggard, as 'good work'?"

"I regard the writing of that school as nothing more than a counter-current. It is no real tendency of the times. Every great current has its counter eddies, and the fiction of the present day, which is pre-eminently realistic, has its spasm of romantic endeavour, just as in Scott's day, when the sentiment ran universally toward romance and extravagant fiction, there were ebullitions of realism. They amounted to little. They were entirely insignificant as showing the feeling of the age. They held to the century the same relation as is now held by the essays of English romancists."

"In proof of this, just glance at the work which public sentiment has passed favourably upon in all intelligent countries. Russia has led in the new school, and holds the foremost place among the nations that have produced great modern novelists. England stands at the very bottom of the list. Hardy is a great, I may say, a very great novelist. His pictures of life are life itself. Mrs. Howells and I have heard under our windows in England the very thoughts, yes, the very accents, which he has attributed to his English peasantry. His truth and sincerity are admirable. And Black, too, so far as I have read him, is an able, skilful writer. But the Russian novelists lead the world. Indeed, I affirm that Tolstoi occupies to all fiction the same relation that Shakspeare occupies to all drama. He has a very strong ethical side, and not only teaches it and portrays it, but lives it. He has given himself up to it. He believes that men should live precisely and literally as Christ lived, and abandoning literature, where he stood at the summit of fiction, he has adopted the daily life of a Russian peasant."

I remarked that that seemed like simplicity itself, and received this retort:

"Isn't that because our civilisation is so sophisticated? We read, and say we believe that Christ is God, but sometimes our actions imply that we scarcely think He meant what He said about the conduct of life."

"Who do you think ranks next to Tolstoi as a writer of fiction?"

"Tourguéneff."

"Do you mean to say that the greatest writers of fiction the world has ever produced are both Russians?"

"Yes, I think I am prepared to say just that. The novels of these men are absolute truth. They are nature bared. They are greatest because their writers have the ability and the courage to paint humanity and its affairs just as they are. That I regard as the highest art."

"Where, then, do you place Dickens?"

"Dickens was a man of his times, and it is only fair to him to view him in that light. The age just before his was extravagantly romantic. The work then done did not fully satisfy the rapidly growing practical thought of Dickens' time. One of the discoveries of his age was that while fiction sounded stilted and unreal when clad in the garb of poetry, yet there were things in life quite as romantic as any of the paintings of the poets. The Russians, and the realistic school they lead, not only dispute this, but urge that fiction does not need the adventitious aid of unreal imagination to give permanent interest. They contend that the daily life of men and women

with its thousand cares and hopes and ambitions and sorrows is of itself full of interest. If any one dared to show it as it really is, without the slightest gloss or draping, he would be giving out the most absorbing fiction."

"How do you answer the charge that real life is commonplace?"

"By asserting that the very things that are not commonplace are those commonly called commonplace. All the rest has long since become hackneyed. In the preposterous what is there to invent? Nothing, except what is so preposterous as to be ludicrous."

"I think my first ideas as to the rare beauties of natural simple fiction that dealt with the actual hopes and fears of men as they are universally shown, came from reading Bjornson's exquisite stories. In Scandinavian literature realism has attained a rare degree of perfection. Most of the modern Italian and modern Spanish novels are of the new schools, and it cannot be denied that the best works in all the Continental tongues show the growth of this tendency."

"Of course we all know the character of the modern French writers. Zola is a great writer. I may regret that he has concerned himself so much with the disagreeable and unhappy things of life, but I do not base my objection to him on that ground. Strange as it may seem, if I objected to him at all it would be that he was a romancist. He is natural and true, but he might better be more so. He has not quite escaped the influence of Balzac, who, with Dickens and Gogol, marked the inauguration of the realistic era by taking realities and placing them in romantic relations. As to Gogol, I should qualify this remark somewhat, for he came much closer to the high art of natural fiction than either Dickens or Balzac. To me the beautiful and inspiring things of life are much more worth writing about than the ugly things, to which the French have run. Perhaps the worst picture of what is false and bad in humanity that fiction affords is given in Maupassant. A true arrangement of the literatures in which realism has obtained the supremacy over romance would place the Russian first; the French, by virtue of Zola's strength, second; the Spanish next; the Norwegian fourth; the Italian fifth, and the English last."—*The Critic*.

READINGS FROM CURRENT LITERATURE.

THE ENGLISH FOUR CENTURIES AGO.

THIS is how we appeared to the intelligent foreigner about the year 1496. It will be observed that the views of intelligent foreigners have undergone surprisingly little change on many points during the last four hundred years or so. The remarks occur in a report drawn up for a Venetian Ambassador to the Court of Henry VII., by a gentleman of his suite. The English are, for the most part, both men and women of all ages, handsome and well-proportioned; and I have understood from persons acquainted with these countries, that the Scotch are much handsomer; and that the Englishmen are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men but themselves, and no other world but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that "he looks like an Englishman," and that "it is a great pity that he should not be an Englishman;" and when they partake of any delicacy with a foreigner, they ask him, "whether such a thing is made in their country?" They take great pleasure in having a quantity of excellent victuals, and also in remaining a long time at table, being very sparing of wine when they drink it at their own expense. And this, it is said, they do in order to induce their own English guests to drink wine in moderation also; not considering it any inconvenience for three or four persons to drink out of the same cup. Few people keep wine in their own houses, but buy it, for the most part, at a tavern, and this is done not only by the men, but by ladies of distinction. The deficiency of wine, however, is amply supplied by the abundance of ale and beer, to the use of which these people are become so habituated that at an entertainment where there is plenty of wine, they will drink them in preference to it, and in great quantities. Like discreet people, however, they do not offer them to Italians, unless they should ask for them; and they think no greater honour can be conferred or received than to invite others to eat with them, or to be invited themselves; and they would sooner give five or six ducats to provide an entertainment for a person, than a groat to assist him in any distress. They all from time immemorial wear very fine clothes, and are extremely polite in their language; which, although it is, as well as the Flemish, derived from the German, has lost its natural harshness, and is pleasing enough as they pronounce it. In addition to their civil speeches, they have the incredible courtesy of remaining with their heads uncovered, with an admirable grace, whilst they talk to each other. They have a very high reputation in arms, and, from the great fear the French entertain of them, one must believe it to be justly acquired. But I have it on the best information, that when the war is raging most furiously, they will seek for good eating and all their other comforts, without thinking of what harm might befall them. They have an antipathy to foreigners, and imagine that they never come into their island but to make themselves masters of it, and to usurp their goods.

NORTH AND SOUTH.

VIRGINIA and Massachusetts were the two original germs from which the great majority of the American populations have sprung; and no two peoples, speaking the same language and coming from the same country, could have been more dissimilar in education, taste, and habits, and even in natural instincts, than were the adventurers who settled these two colonies. Those who sought a new field of adventure for themselves, and