

of dialect seems a pleasant pastime, a hundred new dialects are invented within the twinkling of an eye; if some astute practitioner discovers that the romantic movement is at last being felt in England, an army of false Dumas is instantly enrolled. And these curious examples of illiterate literature are seriously examined and compared. They have no other object, of course, than to lull the lazy brain to sleep; and perhaps they achieve that humble object well enough. But the purveyors of fiction are not satisfied with the abundant pudding which is theirs. They would claim for their wares a critical consideration, and for themselves a comfortable corner of immortality by the side of Fielding and Thackeray. For the moment they seem to attain the summit of their will; but time is the sternest leveller of all, and he will throw them all into the common sepulchre of oblivion.

However, the hastily educated are not satisfied with the newest effects of fiction. They would scrape a bowing acquaintance with the masters who are dead and gone. So there are prepared for their delight countless reprints, pleasant to look upon and light to hold, which shall perform the trick of introduction. The reprints are prefaced by a brief essay, which gives the criticasters something to write about, and serves as a buffer between the hastily educated and the superhuman task of perusing a classic. Neither Dickens nor Scott can make a direct appeal nowadays to their readers. The shock is always decently broken; and if the reader never gets as far as the original, he at least knows what somebody else thinks about it. In brief, we live in an Alexandrian age, which only differs from its type in lack of erudition.

Of course the popularity of books which are no books is of little consequence, and it would not matter at all

if the sham specimens of literature were not confused with the real. But we in England are so democratic in our taste that we mistake success for merit, and we cordially believe that any writer who attaches a vast number of readers is gifted above his fellows. Now, in France, a country we constantly belittle because she is ill-governed, so gross a confusion is impossible. The line is harshly drawn between talent and popularity, and those novelists who rejoice in the largest circulation are not permitted to claim the title of *litterateur*. M. Georges Ohnet, for instance, is read by every sound burgess from Belgium to the Pyrenees, but his colleagues in the art of fiction refuse to recognise his existence. His vast success avails him nothing; he writes for the people, he belongs to the people, and, save from the people, he will never hear one word of approval. Were he an Englishman, the mere fact of his popularity would arouse the sympathy of his fellow-craftsmen; but being a Frenchman, he is of no more importance in the realm of art than a manufacturer of absinthe or the titled proprietor of a dry champagne. And who ever heard of Xavier de Montépin or of Jules Mary? Who knows the names of Vast Ricouard or Dubut de Laforest? Nobody save their readers, who are counted by the hundred thousand.

But a still worse calamity has overtaken England than this tiresome confusion between literature and fiction. Since the people has dictated what the country shall read, we have been assailed by the worst periodic press that Europe has ever known. For this degradation no blame attaches to the people, which knew precisely what it wanted, and could afford to back its fancy. We blame only those who, better trained to distinguish, laid aside all respectable reviews for the weekly or monthly rag-bags of gossip and sen-